One

THE FEBRUARY SCHOOLDAY (1951) finished, mad with electric bells spelling release. In the caverns of the cloakrooms there was treble laughter and guffaws rang under the showers. The whole building seemed to turn to water — flushing cisterns, hissing taps, elementary games in the urinals. Musical Appreciation in the School Hall ended abruptly, two bars before the final bar of the Handel hornpipe, and the whole Hanoverian Thames was tipped into the basin. And outside was rain.

The raincoated dwarfs screamed their valedictions of insult as they ran for the cycle-sheds and the stolid waiting red school buses. Their Wellingtons churned up the rainbow pools of oily rain, and out of a sour-milk sky the rain, tumbled, gathered in the pitted asphalt, sang along the gutters, spewed from the labouring pipes. The rainy town offered its sweating rubber-smelling shops; the villages awaited the returning children with tea and the steaming clothes-horse. The buses splashed off to Hetherton, Great and Little Sprangly, Walmingford, Neshfield, Cripton St Luke and Cripton St Martin, Chainwell, Chipping Wellwater, Riptoe, Crouchbury, all the drearily picturesque towns and villages of the green corner of the county which this school served.

Albert Rich and his rain reflection sloshed through the puddles after the three giggling fourth-form girls. By God, he would have one of them, which one didn't matter. His little pug-face was flushed with a boy's lust. It wasn't right, it wasn't fair, the whole system was wrong in allowing them

to flaunt their country-girl breasts, proud of the way they tautened the regulation white school blouses. They knew all about it, by God they did, tittering over their magazines between lessons. And it was sex all day long, damn it, wasn't it, whichever way you looked at it? Keats's last sonnets and Lady Macbeth's nipples and boneless gums or something and illegitimate sons of Charles II. And the reproductive system in the General Science lesson. Damn it all, they were asking for it, weren't they? Everybody, damn it.

One of the girls screamed with delight as he clumsily stumbled, splashing, muddying his trousers that he was growing out of, failing to catch her. By God, he'd get something, it didn't matter what, he really would, behind the cycle-sheds. Bitches. They knew all about it, bitches as they were. They screamed now in delight. Rain fell drearily.

`Your legs aren't long enough, Rich !'

`Duck's disease, that's your trouble, Richie I'

, he can't run because he's short of wind. Smoking too much, that's his trouble. Ow, you pig, you,' as Rich very nearly grabbed a fistful of girl's mackintosh.

The three happy mouths showed the care of the School Dental Service. Panting and flushed, they laughed in peal after peal, a shrill song of provocative triads, eluding him like colts or fauns as they bounded with girlish grace through the water, their yellow or brown hair tousled under their school hats. But now poor Flossie slithered on rain and oil and, seeking to keep her balance, lost distance. Rich, by God, snoring with exertion, was upon her, damn it. His acne-blotched mug looked evil at her, sexy little bitch as she was. She screamed, but the scream sounded like laughter. Rich had her by her thin arms, his hands gripping anaphrodisiacal mackintosh. Now then, damn and blast her. The concupiscent modulated swiftly to the vengeful.

`Let me go, Rich, you pig, let me go I'

`Language, language,' he grinned, panting. 'Young ladies are not supposed to call people pigs.' He held on tight as she squirmed, her whole body growing liquid under the dripping raincoat, her blue eyes big, struggling to be free. Rich felt no compassion, none at all, gripping the boniness of the girl's arms and surveying in triumph the weak struggling body. 'Now then,' he panted, not quite knowing now what he wanted to do.

`Let her go, Rich!' The other two belaboured his back with ineffectual fists. 'Pig, pig, let her go!'

`I'm getting a bit tired,' said Rich, `of being called a pig. Limited vocabulary, that's your trouble.' (That very same charge had been laid against him that day in the German lesson.) He held on to his prey like a bulldog. Linda began kicking him, and Thelma hooked a hand round his neck to dig a finger into his eye. His eye gushed pain and he let go.

`I'll do the lot of you!' he promised. 'A lot of bitches!' He felt in the trouser pocket that had a hole and pulled out a grubby handkerchief. Dabbing his eye, he ran after them. They were by the gate now, black spider legs going, though knock-kneed, like one o'clock. Then Linda dropped her school-bag in the mud of the flowerless border. She turned, horrified, to see Rich picking it up.

`Give it back!' she said. Rich grinned. 'Please give it back,' she pleaded. `I'll miss the bus!' Her friends waited ahead of her, looking back, getting their breath.

`What's in it?' sneered Rich. 'Love letters?'

`Come on, Linda ' called her friends. 'Come on, you'll miss the bus

`Give it me back!' She was wide-eyed with a worry that cunning Rich was quick to read. She stamped her foot and then tried to wrestle with him. A sort of dance began, she chasing now, he eluding.

'Seems very valuable,' said Rich, as he ran and twisted,

undoing the buckles, slapping her away. 'Let's see what's in it.'

`It's only my books. Oh, come on! Please I'

`The bus is coming, Linda!' called Flossie. And, indeed, the red giant screamed up across the street.

`Geometry,' catalogued Rich, still dancing, eluding, fingering the inky covers Chill theorems appeared sourly in the rain. 'Lorna *Doone.* French.

`We'll have to go, Linda! See you tonight!' The black-stockinged legs bent to the mounting of the bus.

`Ah, what's this?' Rich richly registered great glee. A light went on in the masters' staff-room. The rain, abruptly like the water of a shower-bath, stopped. 'A diary,' said Rich. `A diary for the year 1951. Juicy stuff, I'll bet. The whole month of January and half of February, all nicely filled in. By God,' said Rich, 'you haven't wasted much time this year. By God,' he said in wonder, 'it is juicy stuff. Real juicy.' He opened his mouth like an idiot, reading.

`Please, please, anything! I'll go out with you, anything! Oh, please give it me back!' Her vacant blue eyes melted in tears. Small, thin, pathetic, she stamped, wrung her hands, contorted herself in a dance of supplication. Rich read part of an entry aloud:

. *He had me in his study today. He has ever such lovely hands. He stroked my hair and then he kissed me. And then . .*

`Oh no, no, no, no,' moaned the girl. There was a tentative scrawl of something like mature agony on her face. 'It's mine, it's private, give it back, give it back.'

`Well,' said Rich, looking for an instant sightlessly at the dull vista of houses. I'm surprised, really I am.' A new world seemed to form for Rich at the level of the roof-tops. He greeted it with quiet surprise, not untinged by awe.

`Please, please,' pleaded Linda, 'give it to me I'

`Like he gave it to you?' leered Rich. 'Of all the damned silly stupid things, carrying this about. Well,' he said, 'I should never have thought. Not him, anyway.'

`You've no right. It's private.' She seemed to sway her body in a sort of ritual keening. 'Oh, oh, please.'

`Private?' said Rich. 'You're telling *me* it's private.' He closed the little inky book. 'You can have it back tomorrow. And,' he said, 'I wouldn't go out with you, not if you was to pay me. I'm going to have a good read at this. I should never have thought it.' Wonder again irradiated his cunning young face, spotted generously with comedones.

'What's all the row about?' They both turned guiltily at the sound of the adult voice. It was Mr Howarth, raincoated, hatted, smoking a cigarette, carrying a dispatch-case.

`He's got my book, sir!' Linda turned to him with watery hope. 'It's private, sir, it's mine I Please make him give it back, sir !'

`Neither of you should be here,' said Mr Howarth. Nobody's supposed to be on school premises more than five minutes after the final bell. That's one of the regulations,' he said. 'Something to do with insurance,' he added vaguely.

`Yes, sir,' said Linda. 'Please make him give it back, sir.'

`What is it, anyway?' asked Mr Howarth.

Rich was swift. 'Some history notes, sir. Dates, sir. Have a look, sir.' He held the book out, but not too much. Linda jerked her right hand forward, her mouth open to cry something. She checked the two impulses just in time and brought her fingers back to her troubled lips. 'Linda's lending it me for tonight. Aren't you, Linda?' She said nothing, drooping in her wet raincoat, making a last infinitely pathetic blue-eyed appeal to Rich. 'Oh, yes,' said Rich. 'Your bag.' Linda took it.

`You'd better both get off the school premises,' said Mr Howarth. 'Good afternoon.' Rich gave Mr Howarth a shop-

walker's bow as if, in some school play, he were enacting the part of a shopwalker. Howarth watched them go, Rich running off, the girl drooping after. Queer, queer animals, he thought. He didn't really dislike Rich; the girl he didn't know very well. It was a diary probably, he thought; girls kept diaries at that age. *(Went to tea with Myrtle, pictures afterwards, will have to do homework on bus tomorrow morning, telly gone to be repaired, row between mum and dad.)* And fantasies of an erotic nature about the Captain of the School and some of the handsomer masters. Not, Howarth thought, himself, himself being thirty-nine and hence decrepit, an ancient married man with a son, a son who then approached from the school building, touching his cap shyly.

`She kept you a long time,' said Howarth.

`Yes, sir, Dad. It was about algebra.'

'Is the algebra all right? Can you do it now?'

'I think so. She told me where I went wrong. I don't like maths, though.' It was difficult, thought Howarth, to love a son who looked so much like oneself at the same age; too much of the past was disinterred. Pity was more appropriate, perhaps even fear.

'But you Like *her,* don't you?' asked Howarth. 'You like Mrs Connor?' For himself, thought Howarth, he did not particularly like Mrs Connor. He desired Mrs Connor, however.

'She's all right,' said Peter, without much enthusiasm. She was all right, agreed Howarth to himself. She might be very much all right in bed.

Father and son walked down Morris Road, turned into Rossetti Avenue, then into the High Street, the one thinking of equations, the other of sex. The half-timbered pubs and quaint shops (consciously quaint this Festival of Britain year of many expected tourists) basked in the lifeless grey

of the late February afternoon. It was market-day, with extended opening-hours, and farmers in leggings reeled redly from the just-closed to the still-open. Howarth and Peter passed the dog-meat shop, the tractor agent, the jodhpur tailor and the dealer in spurious antiques, crossed the road (dodging between parked Land-Rovers), went by Woolworth's and the fish-shop that delivered to the manor-houses, then arrived, just in time, at the bus-station. Women with baskets and children from quack private schools were mounting the 39A. The Town Hall clock chimed the half-hour in a flurry of whirring pigeons. Heartburn gripped Howarth nastily as he followed his son on to the bus. The school dinner had been a solution of mince, brown cabbage, a mess of mash served from ice-cream scoops. 'Cry. If I were to cry, who among the angelic orders would hear me?' he translated to himself, muttering the words. But that, somehow, failed to capture Rilke's rhythm. It annoyed him that the square German would not yield more easily. He was having difficulty with the *Duino Elegies,* great difficulty. It was only a pastime, of course, as his wife kept reminding him; there was no question of trying to get the translation published. Still, one liked to do a thing well, didn't one? One indubitably did. Heartburn again.

'Pocock's over there, Dad,' said Peter, when they were seated. Howarth looked across to a chinless boy with a patrician overhang of teeth, son of lucky parents who could afford to scorn state schools. 'Can I sit next to him?' said Peter.

While the two boys chatted about jets (Pocock's father was a car salesman) and chaffered over cigarette-cards, Christopher Howarth brooded on the unfinished row awaiting him at home. Mum and dad are having a bit of a barney. He tried to trace the quarrel back to its source and, failing, saw again that it was not a separate entity, apt for the diary-

entry of a sensitive child, but part of a long turgid continuum; not a symphonic movement, so to speak, but a bleeding chunk of a music-drama stretching from everlasting to everlasting. (`You say you'll try, but you don't seem to make any effort,' she said. 'You had your chance then but you ruined it. It's a sheer lack of responsibility. The school at Ambleteuse was making money. It would have made all the difference to Peter's education if you'd exercised a little self-control. Now here he is at the local grammar school along with every adenoidal Tom, Dick and Harry. You don't seem to notice what it's doing to his speech.')

To hell, to hell, to hell. Howarth banged the triple execration on his knee. True, they had been doing quite nicely with the little school at Ambleteuse. Until, of course . . . But whose blasted fault had it been, really?' You can't go on for ever, can you, doing without it? Restitution of conjugal rights, or something. What was a wife for? He blushed, however, at the memory.

At the next stop the village sexton got on and sat next to Howarth. He smelled richly of earth and he rolled himself a cigarette between stumpy fingers of hands horny with spades and bellropes. He turned his pale knowing eyes on Howarth, intoning a ground-row of country vowels:

`Oo argh err ock og og urp ing whirr?'

It was a question to which Howarth had no answer. However, he tried: 'There are, of course, limits to everything.'

The sexton tasted that slowly, finally, after some seconds of deliberate chewing, swallowing it and nodding vigorously. The right thing had, apparently, been said. They now passed a field where white goats raised their wise goatees from the grazing. They went by a forlorn football pitch, dank and muddy. They stopped and started along rows of council houses, a windswept world of television aerials and sandy gardens, where most of the women with baskets alighted.

Then they turned by the Green, the two thatched pubs which were rivals, Lord Quair's decaying mansion, to stop by the village stores and the vista of the church. As always, seeing the spire which soared above the Grange and the Manor, Howarth's heart lifted. He felt that he was near to a solid comfortable bed, the Middle Ages. Time came alive and crackled like cat's stroked fur in a thunderstorm. The wine-cup was for jolly roisterers in a tavern as well as being the sacramental chalice Eschatological and scatological world, he thought, gone for ever. And the world that the church now wanly fed (a church built by men of his own faith or former faith, faith having long departed) was a world from which he was exduded. The Vicar brayed and the gentry sang A. and M., while Mass was celebrated in Lady Fressingfield's private chapel. To hell, however, with both faiths, he thought now. But if only there were some community in which one could be accepted, somewhere one could feel really at home.

Howarth and his son walked to their cottage. This was less than a hundred years old, but its soft local stone was much punished and bitten by weather, and its slate roof sagged and wore a nap of moss. Howarth turned the key and pushed his son ahead into the dark dampish hallway. The smell of home dispirited him a little, the two innocuous prints (fen landscapes) and the hat-rack, the three library books (hers: Elspeth Huxley, Sheila Kaye-Smith, Nevil Shute) on the monk's seat. He called, without much conviction: 'Here we are, dear!' There was, as he had expected, no reply. The row was still on.

`Shall I go upstairs and start my homework, Dad?' said Peter.

`Yes,' said Howarth, taking his raincoat off. 'She'll call you when the meal's ready.' He watched, with some compassion, the boy with the bony knees ascending the stairs.

The room in which he slept was also his father's study, desked and lined with mainly foreign authors. Goethe, Schiller, Heine, Holderlin, Stefan George somehow inhibited the boy's table of the flags of all nations and model aeroplanes Gide and Proust brooded over his sleeping innocence, champing, one might fancifully think, an impotent pederastic desire. Howarth felt strong pity for the boy who could now be heard flopping his books on to the desk. The responsibility was too great. It wasn't right that one could so easily thrust a soul into the world. The poor young devil would soon be envying, as his father had envied, the adolescent companions who just didn't believe in hellfire. Their conduct had no overtones of ultimate significance, their forefathers having shed guilt like a skin. He also pitied the boy for this growing likeness to himself, as if he were some amateur impressionist giving an excruciating bad impersonation of features, gestures, perhaps (all too soon) temperament as well. Howarth knew he would, in a year or so, be hearing with embarrassment a version of his own voice asking the old questions.

He walked now, rubbing his hands as with satisfaction at being back home, sniffing the air as with great relish of the meal to come, into the kitchen-living-room. Veronica was at the electric cooker, stirring something in a saucepan. The mauve dress with a flowery apron, wrinkled stockings, scuffed shoes.

`Look here,' he said briskly, without preamble, 'if I said anything I shouldn't have said, I'm sorry. One gets a bit over-heated, you see, doesn't one? The words just tumble out, so to speak. Glossolalia you could call it. Especially when one's tired.' He waited. She went on stirring. Howarth greeted old friends on the walls with various nervous grimaces: to 'Primavera' a smirk, to `The Laughing Cavalier' a tragic-mask frown, to Van Gogh's chair a lavatory gesture.

Miniature reproductions, all of them, as though their life of straitened means could not bear the full bloom of anything. On the high-backed wooden chair by the hearth his old enemy lay awake, the Siamese cat called Sirikit. She was Veronica's sole luxury, her mink, her strip-lighted cocktail cabinet, her Dior original. Howarth grinned nervously at Sirikit; Sirikit yawned. Veronica now spoke. She said:

`You're not the only one who gets tired.' She didn't look round. In the Catholic elementary school Howarth, when naughty, had usually been told by his nun teachers: 'Our Lady's turned her back on you.' It felt like that now. This, however, was an Our Lady that he would dearly, if he could only persuade her to see sense and forget about the naïve sexual morality of the Church, like to frolic with and (in Rabelaisian phraseology) bumbast, joyfully rubbing and frotting etc. etc. He said:

`Rabelais, you know, was a Catholic .' Having said it he realised that she would consider it a wicked and frivolous remark. She suffered it with a martyr's pale air, wiping her hands on her apron, checking the time An her wrist with the time on the mantelpiece, taking a cigarette (a small-size filter-tip) from a nearly empty packet on the draining-board. Howarth struck a match, but she lit a spill at the fire. He leaned his arms on the back of the high-backed chair, and the couched Sirikit looked up at his hands, wondering whether it was worth the trouble to rear up and claw him. `Good pussy,' he murmured in propitiation, teasing one brown ear. The cat struck viciously with a flick of yellowing teeth. 'Blast,' he said, sucking the welling blood. Veronica spoke. He listened, still sucking, all ears.

`If you want a cup of tea there's some in the pot in the front room. The Canon's been. He left just before you arrived.

`What did he want?' said Howarth warily.

'It was about Peter's religious instruction. He says he's worried about it. He knows you've lost your faith.' The way she said it made it sound like a disease. Perhaps, he thought, it was. 'He was talking about parental influence.'

The blood still welled. Irritable, knowing he shouldn't be irritable, realising that he was as much to blame for everything as she was, he said loudly, knowing he was speaking loudly and that it was stupid to be speaking loudly: 'I wish he'd mind his own business.' But, of course, it was his business. Irrationally he said: 'I can beat your friend the Canon on theology any day of the week. I can't stand this liberal' Catholicism. Children of Mary and the Guild of the Little Flower. Rattling good drunken evenings with the Men's Confraternity. If he thinks I'm going to corrupt him . .

Veronica faced her husband, standing with one hand on the cooker as if the cooker were either (a) her child to be protected or (b) the whole protective Catholic machine. A sudden squall rattled the window — she raised her head in triumph as if God, like a Siamese cat, were about to strike — and the wind thrust its head into the winceyette nightdress that hung on next door's clothes-line. The arms boxed the air frantically. Howarth, seeing in a sudden flashing vision his own neglect, took in the unweeded winter-beaten garden. Withered cornflower stalks and dried bunches of woodbine. He lighted one of his own cigarettes and turned to Veronica's weak defiant eyes, cornflower blue. She said:

'You always swore you'd do anything to get him to Stonyhurst.'

'Money,' said Howarth. 'Prospects seemed good at the end of the war.'

'You're nearly forty. You're just a grammar school teacher with no prospects. You're not even getting interviews.'

That was true enough. He wondered why. But all he said

was: 'There's no need to keep rubbing it in.' The cat had vacated the chair and lay now in the hearth, breathing asthmatically, looking up at him dreamily in a parody of worship. Howarth sat down in the place the cat had meagrely warmed.

'Another three years with that school and we could have made enough to start one here. I bet Pecriaux isn't doing too badly.' She turned to her pans again. 'Running it as a summer school as well.'

Pecriaux,' said Howarth, 'was most unreliable. Completely untrustworthy. I never liked his eyes.'

'And you were so very, very trustworthy, weren't you? Doing what you did. The shame of it.' She began mixing margarine with the potatoes, the mashing fork making a forlorn scratchy sound which somehow began to deaden what bit of appetite he had. She said, as if remembering something he'd told her he'd been told in the confessional: 'You'd been warned about Penrod.' The very mention of the name made him thirsty for summer France. He said:

'Oh, please, please, Veronica, can't you let that sleep?' He reached into his pocket for another Woodbine, realised that he already had a glowing end in his mouth, then said: 'Don't you think I've expiated that particular crime, if it was a crime?'

'You'd better tell Peter to come down.' She set the table swiftly and fussily and began to serve out steaming brown mince, cabbage of a different shade of brown, mashed potatoes. Peter answered his father's call, then came clattering down the stairs, crying his hunger. Seated, the first forkful in his mouth, he said with pride:

'I can translate what it says on this sauce bottle, Dad. *"Cette sauce est fabriquee* . ''This sauce is fabricated . .

'You don't really fabricate a sauce,' said Howarth. 'You

just make it.' Veronica raised wary eyes to him, as though his disparagement of the use of a Latin derivative were, a subliminal attack on Peter's faith.

. . Of Oriental fruits and spices,' translated Peter.

`Do try not to say "spoices",' said his mother. 'Spices. Ah-ee. Spah-eeces.'

'He'll get over that,' said Howarth. 'It's the dialect of his particular tribe at the present time, however. He's got to speak like that not to be victimised.'

`Victimised,' parroted Peter. And then, for some reason, he defined it. 'Made a victim,' he said. For some other, or the same, reason, Howarth felt the back of his neck grow chill.

`Don't hold your knife and fork like handlebars,' said his mother. 'Keep them on your plate.'

'When can I have a bike, Dad?'

`When your father has more money,' answered Veronica.

`We can count that when we come to the prune course,' said Howarth. 'I was born to denominations of four.'

Veronica looked sharply on the word 'denomination', a Protestant word, and then said: 'How do you know it's prunes?'

`This mince,' said Peter, 'is better than the mince we had at school.'

`And the prunes will be better, too,' said Howarth. 'You just wait and see.'

`It's prunes *with rice,'* said Veronica.

`Sirikit wants her dinner.' The child looked down kindly at the cat like a juvenile Leopold Bloom. The cat stretched upright against Peter's chair, its neck stretched, its open claw reaching up at him for food.

`Don't feed her,' said Veronica. 'She'll get hers when it's cool.' The cat jumped on her knee in conscious panther grace. 'Is you hungry, darling? ' said Veronica. Its eyes

ecstatic slits, the creature rubbed its firm bullet-head against the stroking hand. Above its stretched ermine neck its tight-shut mouth grinned, *la chatte qui rit.*

`Appetite but no soul,' said Howarth, chewing, looking at the cat. 'Strange that they have no souls.'

`My Sirikitticat has a soul, hasn't you, darling?' The cat, not giving a damn about a soul, purred like an engine.

`That's not strictly orthodox, is it?' said Howarth, always imprudent. 'Did they teach you that sort of thing at the Convent?'

`What's "orthodox", Dad?'

Veronica turned on her husband. 'Canon Moon says we meet all the things we love when we get to heaven. That's good enough for me. Sirikit will be there, won't you, darling?' The cat still refused to show any interest in the eschatological.

`Heretical I call that.' Howarth took a final forkful of mince-dripping mashed spud. 'Canon Moon also said time and space exist in heaven. Angels on guard, ten paces this way, ten paces that, looking at their celestial wrist-watches.'

Peter laughed.

`*Will* you *stop that?'* she hissed forcefully like a woman with laryngitis.

`Oh, come,' said Howarth, 'it's only a joke. One can joke about one's religion, surely. God gave some of us a sense of humour, after all. The Bible's full of jokes. Our Lord Himself was a great punster.'

'What's a punster, Dad?'

'A man who likes to play with words of the same sound but different meaning. As when He said: "Thou art Peter and upon this rock . . ." But you know all about that.'

'I could *be* called Rocky,' said Peter. 'Rocky Howarth.'

Veronica looked uneasy. 'And,' said Howarth, 'look at the gargoyles on the church.'

`What are those, Dad?'

`Ugly little devil-faces. Haven't you seen them?'

`I don't like him to go near the church,' said Veronica. `It's polluted. It's unholy. He might be tempted to go inside.'

`Well, there's no harm in that,' said Howarth. `So long as there isn't a service on. Besides, remember, we built it. It was a Catholic church long before it was Protestant.'

'I don't like it,' said Veronica. 'They called yesterday — I meant to tell you — collecting for the steeple fund. I told them straight we wouldn't give anything.'

'But, hang it all,' said Howarth, 'we look at it. It's a lovely church, pride of the county.' Veronica began to serve out rice pudding with prunes. She gave husband five: this year next year sometime never this year. 'Oh, well,' said Howarth, 'it doesn't matter.' He chewed a prune and extruded a prune-stone on to his spoon.

`Gargoyles,' said Peter, fascinated with the word. `Do gargoyles gargle? Rocky Howarth the punster.' His father smiled on him and Peter, encouraged, began to make noises in his throat.

`Stop that,' said his sharp mother. 'Eat your pudding.'

`Talking about churches,' said Howarth, 'what's going to happen when Lady Fressingfield goes? A Protestant family's going to take over the house, I believe. No more Masses in the private chapel.'

`We'll have to go into town, to St Mark's.'

`Why don't you come with us on Sundays, Dad?'

`Your father's tired on Sunday mornings,' said Veronica, quickly.

`Can I be tired, too?' asked prune-chewing Peter.

`You realise that there are no buses on Sunday morning?' said Howarth. 'The service starts at twelve and the last Mass is at eleven.'

`Oh, dear.' She looked at him, blue-eyed, disturbed. He

felt that she saw Sunday's diminished bus-service as all his fault. 'We must get a lift in. Oh, why don't we have a car?'

'Why don't we have a car, Dad? Pocock's father's getting a new one.'

'Pocock's father,' said Howarth, keeping his temper down, 'is a salesman, a respected and useful member of the community. I am merely a schoolmaster.' Peter nodded his understanding, finishing his prunes. Oh, hell, thought Howarth. He was weary of the only two topics they had – faith and money. Was it his fault if he had neither?

'We'll have coffee in the front room,' said Veronica, getting up from the table, wearing the cat like a boa. 'I lit a fire there.' She served out a dainty saucerful to the cat, set the cat to it, and watched approvingly as the greedy creature tore sloppily into its food. Howarth went into the front room, leaving his son to clear the table. In the front room were the tea-tray, the ash-tray with the crinkled cigarette-stumps of *the* Canon, the crumbs of shop cake. Howarth greeted his eighteenth-century ancestor, John Howarth, brown and indistinct in his frame over the piano. His recusant family had lost land, been barred from the universities, that he, Christopher Howarth, might have the right to apostatize. Hurray. There was an earlier ancestor, Elizabethan, who had **beta** burned. It was difficult, sometimes, to be patriotic. He picked out the *Duino Elegies* from the revolving bookcase bid the armchair he called his. Opening it at random he **read:**

. . Die findigen Tiere merken es schon
doss wir nicht sehr verldsslich zu Haus sind
in *der gedeuteten Welt . . . '*

Meaning that the cunning animals have already observed that we are not really very much at home in the explained, **Or** interpreted, world. Which, he thought, was true. To his very small surprise he saw that the cat Sirikit was on the

hearth-rug (he had thought it still to be wolfing in the kitchen) with the look of a cat that had been there for hours. It gave him a straight hostile glare, then extended a leg like a furry drumstick and began to wash it.

They drank their coffee, Peter a mug of milk flavoured with coffee essence. He said:

`Can I go out when I've finished my homework, Dad?'

`May I go out?' corrected his mother.

`Where to?' asked Howarth.

'To see Pocock.' Howarth looked sour: comparative study of fathers' respective finances in terms of you've got this and we haven't. But that was more a mother's way than a son's.

'All right.' Peter ran upstairs to his homework.

'What are you going to do in the Easter holiday?' asked Veronica.

'I haven't really thought about it yet,' said Howarth. 'I might do some work in the bird-bath factory. They're short of unskilled labour, I believe.' This was no joking matter: neither smiled at the prospect of a Master of Arts doing labourer's work. Last summer Howarth had filled cardboard cups in an ice-cream factory; the Christmas holiday had been spent, more genteelly, in cramming Major Horton-Smith's son for Common Entrance. This was 1951, year of commemorated British achievement, in which teachers were little regarded, indigent as mediaeval clerks.

When Peter had gone, when the dishes had been washed and the crumbs from the cloth emptied in the cold February night air, husband and wife sat for a while, he trying to think of the right thing to say, diffident about naming yet again the nostrum which would cure the perpetual biting and wrangling and frayed nerves. He didn't really want, in novelettish locution, to be driven into the arms of. Mrs Connor. He put out a hand to Veronica, pitying her for her lost beauty, her frustration, but qualifying the pity with the

thought that she was a fool, that she ought to get wise to her Church. She took his hand limply.

`We'd better go out for a drink,' said Howarth. 'Peter took the back-door key.'

`Can we afford it?'

`Not Pernod,' he said. 'Draught cider.' He grinned sourly, as though already tasting it. Veronica made up her face, put on her coat with the mangy fur collar, arranged on her head a scarf decorated with stylised London scenes. They walked out into the dark village street, avoiding puddles, skirting the gangs of youths with bicycles who idled, scolding and guffawing, by the lych-gate of the church. These were silent as the two passed, renewing their mirthless laughter only when they were safely islanded again, their raw scared adolescence soothed by the darkness.

The Black Lion public bar was already half-filled. Under the beams and the coach-lamps, in a cavern of dim hunting-scenes and photographs of Derby winners, warmed by a smoky wood fire, the village drinkers and the thick-coated car trade downed their pints, delicately tilted their gins. The landlord showed his stained teeth as Howarth and Veronica entered. Though poor, they were regular customers. Drink was a necessary narcotic to them, a means of begetting a transitory euphoria which wiped the future clean. Things might still be different, there were schemes that could be carried out, he might get that better job, they would throw everything up, go abroad, start again. Drink, too, sometimes turned Howarth into a Catholic again: beer made him exegetical, cider a skilled apologist, gin provoked a Lachrymose Marianism. But it was never the sort of Catholicism that Veronica wanted to see in him: it was swearing and boisterous and made no reference to chastity. After a couple of pints of cider at fourpence the glass, Howarth made an improper suggestion to his wife: he told her that he wanted

to sleep with her. She blushed. Behind them by the fireplace the fuse of a whispered anecdote led to an explosion of shouting manly laughter.

`We're not going into all that again,' said Veronica. 'I don't want another baby. I nearly died of Peter.' Howarth grinned at that: Veronica had never read Mr Eliot. He said:

'A lot of Catholic husbands and wives manage quite nicely. His Holiness said something recently about the Safe Period.'

'I don't believe there's any such thing,' said Veronica. 'It's too much of a risk. Besides, Canon Moon said that married chastity was a state.blessed of God.' The name God suddenly reverberated in a twenty-to-or-past-the-hour silence that shed an angel's feather over the drinkers. Many looked shocked; Veronica blushed. Howarth said, when the talk had started again:

'I don't particularly want to be blessed of God. I want to live a normal man's life. What I want is one of the things I got married for. That's reasonable enough.'

'It's for having babies,' said Veronica. 'That's laid down.'

`Yes,' agreed Howarth, 'that's one of the things it's for. But surely it might be regarded as a good in itself, or a symbol of good or something.' He sighed; he didn't really want to argue. He wouldn't have to argue with Mrs Connor.

Veronica drained the last inch of her apple-vinegar, shuddering at the tartness. 'Buy me another. Give me a cigarette.'

`You're quite the little devil, aren't you?' said Howarth nastily. 'I wish to God you were.'

`We've been over all this before. Besides,' she sucked her cigarette alight, 'you know what the specialist said about the danger if I did have another.'

`We've no need to have another. He offered to fit you with . .

`Not so loud. That woman's listening.' Howarth turned to

see a Guinness-loving crone listening. He smiled at her; she smiled back and went on listening. Howarth said to his wife:

`And you refused.'

'Of course I refused. The Church is quite plain about it.'

The Church. The red-hatted capon Church, nourished with fat and cleansed with quinine of the pains of enforced celibacy. Howarth said nothing. Veronica said:

'The drink's having its effect on you, isn't it? It's making you morose. Have you enough money for one more for me? You've had enough.' Last orders' was loudly shouted and there was a mad scamper of final ordering. A man with a market greengrocery stall bought a round consisting of two Scotches, three gin-and-tonics, a large pineapple juice, a cherry brandy for the missis, a port-and-brandy for his sister-in-law, and just a pint for himself. He paid from a dirty wad.

'You see?' said Howarth, grinning malevolently at his wife. 'And I just have enough for one half of cider. And tomorrow's bus-fares.' He began to swear rhythmically and roundly, with much showing of his lower teeth.

'Stop that, Christopher,' said his wife. 'Tight, that's your trouble.'

In a flurry of good-nights people began to leave. A moon with an escort of stars rode the turbulent sea-sky with thrashing screws. The wind had risen, March on its way. Howarth belched, wincing at a twinge of heartburn. He raised his eyes to the enthroned saints. Who, if he were to cry, would hear him among the angelic orders? He said it aloud in Rilke's own words, with romantically exaggerated vowel-sounds: *'Wer, wenn ich schriee, hare mich denn anus der Engel Ordnungen?'* A workman with a drooping suspicious underlip said: 'German, that is. No good German but a dead un."This one's dead,' said Howarth. 'Come on home,' said Veronica, taking his arm. Howarth foresaw the bed, her dark hair on the pillow, the cat lying between them as

it always did, giving him one last warning look before the light went out. There would be no cat between them when he went to bed with Mrs Connor. Nor any churchy chastity. Nothing, not even guilt. Veronica had, after all, asked for it.

Two

FEEL better this morning,' said Mr Woolton, 'decidedly better. And winter is near its end. There is a faint doggy smell of the hounds of spring, very faint perhaps, but genuinely there, a pre-vernal snuffle.' Pleased with the phrase, he smiled and fixed his myopic gaze on the suburban trees, turning the blurred shapes to sharp images with the aid of memory and the knowledge that his bifocals lay, waiting to switch on the day, on the dressing-table. His bare feet splayed on the bedroom carpet, his thick grey untidy hair haywire with welshcombing, he looked across the field that marked the end of the suburb.

'It's finished,' he said. 'The school's finished. Space, light, air, shining laboratories, rational chairs and tables. But, above all, space. We've been working in incestuous rat-holes.' He turned to squint at his wife, his arms akimbo, tall and scraggy in faded blue pyjamas. She was already clad in vest and corset and was looking, grumbling, for her directoire interlock knickers. He surveyed her dim image without favour. What was love, besides being not hereafter? How did one reconcile this complete lack of desire even for .Minimal physical contact with a preparedness to avow that love, or some such comfortable child of so many years , was still there? Surely, at the age of forty-six, there no need for her to look so old. He, he was convinced, . his early fifties, looked young enough — unpaunched, ti tely, with the eagerness of the eternal student. His nerves, course, were not good, but that was the fault of people; would leave him alone, if people would only **try**

and *understand,* if they would only allow him to show them all what a really liberal headmaster could do . . . But the new school would mean, perhaps, a new life. The importance of environment. He nodded and nodded at the pleasant February morning, thinking of the importance of environment. He sighed, then said to his wife, lovingly:

`How are you today, my love?' The show of jaunty tenderness masked a certain proleptic irritation, for he knew there would be no answer, or only an answer demanding more concern and a greater tenderness, more and greater than he, or any man, was capable of giving. She was becoming, in this climacteric of hers, herself a kind of autumn, a deciduous tree losing leaves that, swept away in tears and rage, lay about in a rotting mound of suspicion. That was how it was taking her: he didn't want her, he was after other women, the whole town was littered with the thrown-away victims of his satyriasis. Such utter grotesque nonsense, but he couldn't convince her of his fidelity: he could only act badly the attempt to convince, knowing the whole thing to be a weary charade that might, for all one could tell, go on for ever. Strange things happened at twilight, when curtains were drawn and the house settled into stillness. But, at any time, the mind of a woman could jump like a startled mare, rush off in a straight line, ignoring the reins.

`You could have been in earlier last night,' she complained, with the new half-whine that was settling into her voice. 'I was all on my own. There was nothing to do except go to bed. Your mother was next door with Mrs Jebb:

'They asked a lot of questions,' he said. 'I couldn't just leave in the middle of the discussion now, could I?'

'Miss Withers was there, wasn't she?'

`She took the chair.'

`You went to have a drink with her afterwards, didn't you?'

'No. Most certainly not. Whatever makes you think that?'

He saw himself clearly now, his glasses on; sitting on the tumbled bed that shone from the wardrobe mirror, a leg raised from the floor. His breast was bare, his matted hair lay something on the something. 'I came straight back here,' he said. `No, wait, I didn't. I had to get some papers from my office. Then I came back.'

`And did Miss Withers go with you when you went to the office?'

'Oh, this is utter nonsense.'

'Alice said she saw you, the two of you, the other night. You were both going into the Crown, she said.'

'I see. Alice is at it again.' Hearing the Noel Coward song at the back of his mind, he couldn't help smiling. She saw the smile and started to whimper. 'Alice,' he said, more sternly, 'forgets her position. She talks too much. And maliciously.'

`She's been a good friend to me,' said Frederica Woolton. 'She stood by me all through my illness.' It was a very flat voice, and Woolton fancied he could hear again the impure diphthongs of her provincial youth, the time of their courtship, like old wallpaper under the coat of distemper. Distemper. Distemper was good.

'My dear, it's all nonsense.' If only it wasn't, he could feel less heated. 'We both went into the Crown to see the manager. It's a question of catering, you see, for the opening of the new school. And I'm bound to see a lot of Miss Withers, aren't I, in the way of my job? After all, she *is* Senior Mistress.' An unfortunate title, really. Frederica Woolton, capable in her present state of granting the word one connotation only, began to whimper again. A damned good slap across the chops. Shocked, Woolton heard a devil from his youth whisper that suggestion. But he said, sufficiently sharply however: 'I wish to God you'd remember that Alice is only a secretary, that she belongs to the town,

as her family has for generations, and that this town loves scandal better than anything. Better than money, if that's possible.' His mouth felt sour, cluttered with dentures. It was February all right, genuinely winter.

For want of anything better to do, she began to cry quietly. Her blubbered face suddenly looked young again. Strange that women always looked their best, he thought, when conventionally they looked their worst. He went over to her, still shirtless, his trousers bagging and hobbling his steps, and tried to put his arms round her. She didn't want that. He said:

'There, darling, don't think about these things. You can't stop people talking, you know. People *will* talk' He couldn't tell her she was ill, that these fantasies of hers were the curiously coloured smoke of a fire that was about its own biological business. 'I swear,' he swore, 'that there's only you. You won't be so alone when all this business is over. There's a lot to do just now, you know. If my evenings were freer we could go out together as we used to.'

'We used to,' she said, dabbing her cheeks dry.

'And will again. Things will be much better when we move into the new school. People will be happier, work better. It's been a worrying time for me, you know. Dress quickly,' he said, looking at the alarum-clock on the bedside table. 'I'm going to be late.'

His mother's eighty-year-old voice, shrill and plebeian, called from below. She had cooked breakfast. He suddenly felt a great hunger, not for breakfast, but to be freed from the present, from all the strata of unhappy time that surrounded him. He yearned for the scholarly life, Thucydides in cool Greek type that commemorated Porson's exquisite calligraphy, learned wrangles about verse quantities, the phonetic value of phi, the lost digamma. Meanwhile, sausages waited below and the day, a nightmare of many parcels,

beckoned with a child's cruel eyes and a grubby nail-bitten finger.

He kissed his mother on her dry worn cheek. She was sitting at the table in the kitchen, looking at the local paper. She had finished her porridge and sausages and was mumbling toast thick with butter. 'Help yourself,' she said, in her voice of tarnished brass. 'Sausages under the grill. You're going to be late.' She had arrived at that blessed destination — the railway terminus where she must now wait indefinitely for the private car. The man would come to collect her soon, but nobody knew quite when. All she had to do was to flip through magazines (hardly worth while starting a book now), look around, pity those still anxious about train-times, and eat. Woolton envied her her old woman's greed, her old woman's scant need for sleep. She was also dispassionate, unsympathetic, crackling with energy.

'It's in today's paper,' she said, 'about that boy and girl. Such goings-on. I don't know how you could miss what was happening under your very nose.'

Woolton blushed, carrying his sausages from the grill. An unfortunate business, but, as usual, exaggerated by the gossips. A love affair between two fourth-formers, passion of Mediterranean intensity culminating in a jealous fit on the boy's part, an attempt to do physical violence to his inamorata. He said:

'My dear mother, I can't arrest biological processes. It's the dance of the hormones, bigger than themselves, as they say on the films. It's part of their wider education.' Having said that, he realised that he was quite incorrigible, always unintentionally betraying himself into the indiscreet, the facetious, with a kind of intensity that shocked himself as much as his hearers. His mother picked on 'dance of the hormones' and said:

'Wicked. They shouldn't have these dances. It says in the paper that he gave her a thick ear. All this short hair You're too lax with them, I'd say. And this boy tried to hit her father. Such goings-on. A firm hand's what's wanted, not all this letting them have their own way.' She read on with relish, sucking tea from a mug, her eyes on the faint crude type of the paper. Woolton, sighing, began to squeeze out a little essential news from the bulky *Times.* He tried, between mouthfuls of sausage, to take in the fourth leader: that was his world, not this of sordid juvenile passion in a place dedicated to learning. Still, in the new school it would be different: there would be something anaphrodisiacal about the decor, something blood-cooling about the spacious classrooms and ringing corridors. Environment made such a difference.

His wife appeared, looking shrunken and cold. She sat with a cup of tea, refusing food. 'Don't force her if she doesn't want to,' said the old woman. 'They won't go to waste. I'll have one cold in the middle of the morning.'

'I'm coming into town this morning,' said his wife. 'If I feel all right, that is. I'll drop in at the school.'

`Why, Frick?' The affectionate shortening of 'Frederica' hung between them like a deflated toy balloon the morning after a school party. 'Do you want anything special?'

`To see you,' she said. 'Don't you want me to come? I want to see Alice as well. We can have some coffee together.'

`You can have some with me, in my office.'

`Not with the rest of the staff? You want to keep me away from them, that's what it is. You've some reason. They might talk to me about you, that's what it is.'

`Somebody here,' crackled the old woman, 'has a pair of budgerigars for sale. Talking ones. I wouldn't mind going round to have a look at those. Keep me company, those would.' She went on reading methodically down the advertising columns, looking through the pathetic little windows at other people's needs. Woolton suddenly said:

`Shut up, both of you!' His mother said:

`Laying hens, too, somebody here is advertising. We could keep those in the back garden.' Repentant, Woolton left his sausages, throwing his napkin on the table, and walked round to his wife. He kissed her forehead, saying: 'I'm sorry.' She went on sipping tea as though it were a horrid medicine. Woolson got a lunatic impression that he didn't exist. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry I' he yelled. The small black kitten dashed to shelter behind the waste-bin. Woolton's mother raised her eyes from her paper and said:

`No good saying you're sorry. Deeds, not words, is what I want to see. Shouting first thing in the morning. Disgraceful. Wait till your father comes home.' Woolton's father had been dead some ten years.

`I'd better go,' mumbled Woolton. 'I'm going to be late.'

'They'll give you the cane,' said his mother, 'and serve you right too.' She suddenly realised where and when she was and said: 'Oh.'

`Do come round this morning,' said Woolton to his wife, if you feel all right, that is. I'll look forward to it,' he added. `It'll make a pleasant change.' His wife went on nourishing her sense of being ill-used. Both silly old women, he thought. He went to the hall-cupboard and took out his overcoat, dosing his eyes, trying to exercise charity. To be alone again, to be free of women, a celibate scholar, witty, witty sometimes with delicate impropriety, whose monographs were admired, whose major work on Pindar .. .

He wheeled his bicycle out of the garage. That garage had been built for some past headmaster (perhaps Reynolds, who had had a private income) glorying in a tycoon's car. Now, each morning, a *ridiculus mus* squeaked out. He cycled with slow legs, thinned further by clips, out of the suburb, down

the main road into the town, as once, many years ago, in Oxford. He had never desired a car. 'I'm so stupid about gears and so forth. Nor could I learn to reconcile the merely approximate notion of a straight line expressed by our roads with the more austerely Euclidean one that seems to obsess the engine.' A little eccentric, other-worldly, certainly the scholar. refuse to bow down to the machine. I prize inefficiency as the last of the human virtues.' A statement which, unfortunately, had been all too easily crashed back at him, the racket whistling through the air. Yet he was a liberal. One of the last, he thought — a liberal humanist. Sweetness and light, the core of good which slept in all men, waiting to be awakened and revealed by time, that slowly unwinding robe which sheltered the lineaments of the numen till human eyes could bear to gaze upon them. Woolton rang his bell dringalingaling as he came down the hill. A stupid milk-float was stationary near the crown of the road. Bloody fool. Woolton permitted himself that exercise of uncharity.

Coming into town, he saw his school, the old school, in the half-distance. The uneasy atmosphere there, the bloody-mindedness, it was all epiphenomenon, a mere reflection of the rotting floorboards and the carious walls. They were to move into the new building before summer; on that he had insisted. There, behind the Palladian portico, the hushed columns, the graven Latin inscriptions, there would be work and amity for the children of light.

Woolton, aware that he was late, rushed for his gown to his office and then, robed in dignity, swept down the aisle of the assembly hall between the phalanges of children (boys on the right, girls on the left). As always, he felt a certain uneasiness, as though his control were poised only on a needle-point. He stood on the stage in front of the lectern, his heart pumping away more strongly than seemed necessary. The walls sweated, and yesterday's smell of the complex chemistry of young bodies was revived by the crammed total assembly (though where were the masters?) just as (though this could never apply to Woolton) last night's drunkenness could be revived with a single glass this morning. A boy broke wind and it coloured the palpable air like a grain of permanganate colouring water. Somebody at the back guffawed as at a witty remark. There was the fear, already a familiar motif of nightmare, that chaos would break out and he be unable to stop it; that one of the staff might have primed the school to revolt at a signal, to disobey an order *en masse.* But the hymn (Ennis, the music master, accompanied it) was sung lethargically enough, and there were embarrassed coughs as a boy with a boily nape read the cryptic words of Corinthians, his voice breaking occasionally in a clarinet squeak. Then he himself stood, and all heads bowed a little, as he prayed over them:

`0 Heavenly Father, Who knowest the secret goodness in men's hearts, remembering that Thou didst make man in Thine own image, grant that we may work towards the ends that Thou hast ordained in order to reveal Thy kingdom on earth and in our living flesh see the paradise that Thou hast promised.'

He had created a positivist deity of his own and the liturgy apt for its worship he, as now, improvised or, on sleepless nights, composed more deliberately in his head, repeating the words until sleep came.

Chaos did not break out, the children were quiet enough, and with the usual ghost of relief he marched back to his office. Dunhill, the Senior Master, wearing a dog-eared mortarboard and carrying a dog-headed stick, shouted: 'Stop talking!' and, as if suffering from crapula: 'Shut up, blast you!' Some of the children obeyed. Soon there were separate

cells of noise, some (depending [a] on whether the form-teacher had yet arrived [b] on whether, having arrived, he was either [i] capable of or [2] interested in stopping the noise) noisier than others.

A trickle of children waited outside the Headmaster's office, while he scrabbled among the mail on his desk, lists, chits, directives about fuel, circulars about specialist courses, multiplicate forms, request for returns, bills, invoices, notes (on blue lined paper) explaining absences. His little bust of Plato gazed with blank eyes, like the stones of ginger-beer bottles, at the world of Universals. The Senior Mistress came in, a chalky gown over a sensible costume, a heavy wood-looking necklace, wisps escaping from her untidy brown hair-rolls. Woolton, looking up, saw a small pimple by the left wing of her nose.

`Good morning, Miss Withers.'

`There's a bad leakage of gas in the Biology lab. I can't trace it.'

TB call Smith in. Thank heavens we'll be moving soon. Everything seems to be falling to bits, doesn't it?'

`Yes. A girl's been to see me; she says that Rich has stolen a book of hers.'

`Rich. 4A, isn't he? He's not a bad boy. But then, of course, none of them are bad boys. Not really. I'll tell his form-master. He's probably just borrowed it.'

`Gardner's doctorate seems to have come through. He was talking about it.'

`Gardner a doctor?' Woolton opened his mouth, staring at her. 'Doctor Gardner. Well. He'll want me to tell the school how to address him. Well. I'd no idea.'

`They wear a red gown, don't they? The whole thing is said to look very impressive. A flash of red among the black.'

`Yes, yes.' Woolton's fingers slashed open envelopes blindly and surely; the finger-tips read, from shape, texture, thick-

ness, embossed heading, roughly what sort of letter it was. `I suppose he'll be leaving us soon. Doctor Gardner. I'd no idea he'd written a thesis. Nobody seems to tell me very much. Not that I ..

`The influence of Petrarch or Plutarch or Pluto or somebody on something or other.' Miss Withers was an M.Sc. 'No, he doesn't talk of leaving. He seems to be settling down.'

`Yet he wanted a headship.'

`One particular headship.' Miss Withers scratched her face, dropping her jaw to tauten the skin. 'He's not trying any more.'

`Yes.' Woolton's fingers, like trained setters, stopped and pointed when they came to the next envelope. His eyes confirmed. It must be. He smelt the school for an instant, and it was like an inspiration, with the nose of a new and frightened pupil. At last the organ announced in an unequivocal spasm that the disease had quite definitely set in. For so long he had thought: 'I knew it would go. Something I ate disagreed with me. There was never really anything serious the matter.' He would not read the letter; he crumpled it and threw it in the waste-paper basket. 'That's right, Miss Withers.' He had forgotten what they'd been talking about. One more pain on the register, to be given a number, eleven o'clock milk, and a progress dossier. 'Well,' said Wootton, remembering, 'at least we can say that we've got a real scholar on the staff.'

Children came in with whispered, mumbled or broken-voiced barked requests, explanations of absence, reports of lost pens, bicycle pumps, comics, football boots, film-club badges. And all the time he itched to know if that letter was what he thought. He had a perverse longing to touch the nerve of the tooth, to probe, say, with a nail-file. But it was obvious. If it didn't exist it was necessary to invent it. The words of the last letter appeared sometimes before sleep,

projected on the inside of his eyelids and framed in green: `. . . It's time you realised what a laughing-stock you are. I heard some men talking the other night, toasting you as the town's prime joke. For the sake of the school, get out. Let somebody who can keep order take over your job . . Typed neatly and unsigned. Such things, his philosophy told him, had to be ignored as the utterance of a drunk or half-wit, like the surliness of the bus-conductor to whom one was still, on principle, so polite. It was not human to behave like that; a non-human state had supervened. People were not really capable of that sort of thing, could not of their nature, in a sane state, behave consistently that way. Thus gastric pains were mere temporary indigestion, and toothache could be cured with oil of cloves.

`. . . And,' mumbled the last boy, an unsavoury nail-bitten pale-haired scarecrow with his shirt inside out so that the matchstick collar-stiffeners showed, 'he said to come and tell you about it.'

`Who did?' asked Woolton, frowning. 'About what?'

`About bird-watching, sir. I'm a bird-watcher, sir, and there was a pair of tits, sir, on the window-sill in the classroom, sir.'

`Well,' said Woolton warily, 'shouldn't there have been?'

`I was looking at them instead of the blackboard, sir. So he said to come and see you, sir.'

`You go off now and attend to your work,' said Woolton sternly. 'Tits, indeed.'

The boy went, grumbling to himself. Alone, Woolton searched in the waste-paper basket and found the crumpled letter. Leaning against the wall, he carefully smoothed it out. The single sheet was handwritten, a serious, stilted, half-literate request from a parent: `.. . And he has been having a bit of trouble with his bowels lately so I have been giving him sirip of figs and will you please let him leave the room

when he asks as it will be urgent. Yours respectful Mrs R. Curtis.'

He should have sighed with relief, but he foreknew unhappily that this letter, any reference to the visceral caprices of the young, the waste-paper basket itself perhaps, could now become another speck of dust round which the phantom, seeking materialisation however grotesque, could weave itself. He was shaking, so he calmed himself by sitting at his desk and sipping a line or two from his old copy of Horace, always there like a Hans Andersen brandy bottle whose supply never failed.

`Integer vita scelerisque purus
Non eget Mauris iaculis neque arcu ..

Sapphic, to Fuscus Aristius. The good man doesn't need to protect himself with Moorish arrows and a bow. But was goodness enough? Calmer, smiling over two millennia at the fat little Roman running away from battle, leaving his 'poor little shield' behind, Woolton began to work on his letters. Alice, who always arrived late, came in to show him lists of figures.

`And they're asking for a bigger allowance for sports equipment.'

`Yes.' He looked at her without affection. He ought perhaps to be grateful for her efficiency, but he knew too well that her loyalty was not to the school which he was trying to forge into a projection of his own humanistic ideals, but to a much older image — the school which expressed the town, the corrupt civic order of the old shopkeeping families, of which hers was one. She was as old as he, and he saw for a moment their two heads joined Janus-fashion. For him the future fused with an ideal past — a sort of Golden Age incarnation of Hellenic values; but she was satisfied with the cosier nearer past which the present perpetually fed. She sent out to old pupils circulars announcing reunions, and at

these streamer-hung parties of hard sausage-rolls and soft drinks she shone as the tutelary goddess of the school, the abiding myth. . . One thing we can say, however: staffs change, and — may I say this? — even headmasters come and go, but Alice is always here.' (Cheers.) 'She remains our link between those happy carefree days which are gone for ever and the hard-working present, when, as I look round, I see none of us getting any younger, some of us even with aldermanic stomachs' (Laughter) 'although Alice naturally remains as young and as lovely as ever.' (Cheers, claps.) 'And so I ask you to be upstanding . . .' Clatter of feet, chairs, clink of orangeade bumpers.

Woolton looked at Alice, as young and as lovely as ever. She simpered as if she really were, coy eyelashes and a gleam of pot teeth. She said, in the accent of the town:

be able to start on the invitations soon. I'm working out the list now.'

`Yes. It will need thinking about. The Director will perform the ceremony, of course.'

`Oh. I thought it would be the Mayor. Everybody thought that it would be the Mayor.'

`Well, no. This school isn't the property of the town. He might care to propose a vote of thanks, but . .

The town likes to think of the school as its own, even if it does come under the county.' *Her* school really, of course: that's what she was thinking; after all, she'd given forty years of her life to it: nobody else had been as loyal as that. And yet, as the yellowing records showed, she hadn't been exactly a prize pupil. She hadn't even played any games.

`Anyway,' said Woolton, 'we'll be having a Governors' meeting.'

`Next Tuesday.'

`It will be discussed. Next Tuesday, as you say.'

`Makes me feel a bit sad. The school's been here so long.

Haunted, you might say.' She raised her eyes to the ceiling as if, like flies, ghosts crawled there.

`Haunted, yes,' said Woolton vigorously. 'With the wrong sort of phantom.' He realised yet again that he never knew when to be quiet. 'Frock-coated councillors bloated with their own awareness of virtue. Sanctimonious, not really giving a hang about education. Sunday schools smelling of boots.' Why he brought that in he just did not know. 'I want our new school,' he said, with rhetoric that smacked back hollowly, `to be haunted with ideals, liberal ideals, blessed by the great dead poets and philosophers, lacking both fear and hypocrisy.'

Loud applause. Boo. Prrrrrrp.

`Why,' he thought, deflating himself, 'do I bother to talk to her like this? She doesn't understand, and besides, without being snobbish, she is after all only ..

`Full of memories. I often think I see Mr Crayshaw's ghost. Fancy, you'd say, but there's an awful lot in it. He had such a strong personality, so very much loved.'

`Meanwhile, children fall through the floorboards. That new child has an awful gash on her leg. You can't keep a rotting shell like this alive for the sake of a few ghosts.' He eyed her with a vague sort of maliciousness. She too would start from scratch in the new school. Weak triumph glowed and was then blown out.

`And how is Frederica? Did she sleep all right?'

He pretended, stupidly, to wonder who Frederica was. `Oh,' he said, 'my wife. My wife. My wife says she's coming to see you this morning.'

`Oh, good. We can have a nice little gossip.'

`I don't doubt,' said Woolton. She left his office for hers, offering him the sketch of a simper and a caricature of a languishing glance. A bell rang, end of first period, relaying its jangle to other bells up and down the school. The children

had picked up a few crumbs — a new irregular verb, a fresh historical atrocity, some bare-boned chemical formula or other — and now dawdled to the next snack of learning. Ennis in the hall, rid of his first-form songsters, crashed into loud Stravinsky like a swear-word, then, as his new class shambled in, tamed the piano to a harmless sedative voluntary. Hockey-sticks clattered and guttural boys began changing for football. There was a shy knock at Woolton's door. 'Come in,' he said, over the giggles and thumps. The door opened and Miss Fry entered. Her face was screwing up for tears, and he thought, oh hell, his life was all women. He looked with alarm and some pity at the young, neat figure. She was about the same age as his own daughter Julia; Julia had come home after her first term's teaching to weep and say she couldn't stand much more of it. Now she was safe, married to, of all things, a pet-shop owner in Hull, happy with the puppies and budgies. When he met her now that old, reflection of himself seemed hardly there any more — a personality inspiring no confidence, a voice rather easy to caricature, a cruel capacity for unhappiness and optimism. She had handed those attributes over to Miss Fry, new last term, with a good degree in English and no disciplinary gift, who said now, breaking down:

`I can't teach them any more, Mr Woolton, I just can't. It's those boys, Carter, Freeman, Gilpin . . Woolton saw it all quite clearly, this girl standing before the class, elegant in a gold-weave jumper, her young breasts boring at the eyes of the slack-mouthed, itching adolescents, islanded obscenely in the drab room, trying to quieten the perpetual din, failing, desperately raising her cultured though childish voice to teach mechanically, hopelessly. 'Now, please listen. This is really very interesting, if you'll just pay attention.

comes on again with his train, and he expresses the opinion that Cassius . . .' Drowned in roars, for they are

quick enough to spot things like that. 'Train ! Express ! Hohohoho ! What was that? What did she say?' She pretends she meant it, tries to laugh herself, but the risor muscles think she wants to cry, and her eyes screw up. She beats on the desk feebly with a well-shaped hand, the fingernails red-lacquered. 'Please, please ! It's not as funny as all that !' But the laughter goes on. 'Train ! Express ! Chuff-chuff-chuff ! Ho-ho-ho-ho !'

`It's 5B, is it, Miss Fry? Freeman and Gilpin . . .' It would be satisfying to reduce, somehow, a lout like Gilpin to snivelling, grovelling abject howling for mercy, another chance. But he couldn't think of any new technique. Gilpin was so ugly, too, almost miraculously so, as though Nature had made some very special effort in the direction of a new kind of human superlative. But Woolton excused his feelings towards Gilpin, his unwillingness to act (with a liberal talking-to) for his improvement, by classifying him as inhuman, beyond the pale.

`I can't go in there again,' sobbed Miss Fry. 'They're so horrible.'

`I've told you before,' said Woolton. 'You know the ringleaders, send them to me.' (Except Gilpin, he qualified to himself; Gilpin was not a person.)

`But they just laugh.' She had taken a small, very clean handkerchief from her sleeve and was trying to stop the tears, ineffectually, like dabbing a new razor-cut.

`I'll hit them harder next time.' (But he knew he wouldn't; he hated the cane.) 'They won't laugh again.'

`They say it doesn't hurt. They're not frightened.'

It was true: it didn't hurt because it wasn't really meant to hurt. That rod in the corner was a fossil. He would much rather talk to the miscreant, make him see sweet liberal reason. They would, however, just listen sullenly: Tessin Yessir.' And then quiet laughter in the corridor as they

went off, having missed a whole period of P.T. 'But you know, Miss Fry,' he said, 'they're not bad really. Not even Gilpin. Gilpin is beyond good and evil.' (There he went again.) 'They're just young, trying to cope with the agonising business of growing up. They're really frightened, frightened of the things that are happening inside them, and they have to put on this big bold front. They're not really being malicious, you know. Use a little tolerance, keep your sense of humour. When you show them that you don't really care, they'll soon stop.'

`I've tried everything.' Her tears drank some of the dull February light as she looked up at him, hopeless and distressed. It wouldn't really be so bad, thought Woolton, taking in with pity her weak snub nose and her well-groomed red-brown hair. She'd marry soon, she was bound to. But when she said: `I'll have to leave. I never thought it would be like this,' he panicked.

`No,' he said. 'You mustn't leave. Not just like this. Surely,' he said, almost begging, 'you'll be getting married soon. A pretty girl like you . . .' She opened her mouth at him, shocked. 'But don't just go. Wait till we move to the new school. Things will be different there, you'll see. Environment makes all the difference.'

He played over, in memory, a band of the last Governors' meeting: 'We can't understand these staffing difficulties. Five of the women teachers, two of the men, leaving in a single year. We never had these problems before. What are their *real* reasons for leaving?'

`Marriage. Better posts. Father died, had to go and live with her mother.'

`Three only stayed two terms. Would you say they were happy here? Must have some stability, for the sake of the examination forms.'

Wootton switched off and turned again to Miss Fry. 'Now,

my dear, please don't take all this so seriously. Try and laugh at it,' he said. 'If you like, I'll take you off the upper forms. It should be easy enough to change. I'll see Turton about it today.'

`It's a nightmare.' She gave way completely, her thin shoulders, under the sober dignity of the bachelor's gown, beginning to shake. Her careful make-up was smudged and she threw over, as with an unspeakable relief, all control; nothing mattered except this abandon of tears. They shot from her eyes and one caught the sheet of writing on his desk. He watched her helplessly, fascinated, then looked down to see the words 'and if you would let him leave the room' fattening and dissolving into a little wash of pale blue. He said:

`Please don't cry. Do try and control yourself. You don't want the children to hear.' But it seemed as though that were her intention: she sobbed more loudly, reaching an inhuman sort of shout. 'Please, please,' pleaded Woolton. He, unwise as always, took her by the shoulders and tried to shake reason into her. 'That's enough now. Remember, you're a rational person, a scholar.' She howled louder at that. 'You mustn't give way.'

A mad animal noise now seemed to Woolton, himself quite ready to give way, to fill the whole of the building. A sort of primitive terror of this ghastly, unnecessary sex, always prepared to go mad quietly or loudly, began to fill him. 'Please, please !' He folded his arms round the girl's body, trying to crush out the sound like flames. She raised up her head, intent on baying to the ceiling. Then the door opened. That, of course, was bound to happen.

`I wondered what was wrong,' said Alice. 'I'm sorry, I suppose I should have knocked.'

Woolton saw himself, the Headmaster, his arms round a young and personable member of the women's staff who

was sobbing hysterically. He lowered Miss Fry roughly to a chair.

`Send for Miss Withers,' he said. 'Get a glass of water. Hurry.'

`Yes,' said Alice. 'Poor girl.'

Three

THE BOX-JAWED, cropped-blond hero swam through air into the subterranean vault. This hissed with conveyor-belts leading to dark pits of inhuman screams; there vast retorts bubbled, levers glowed grey, coils of glass light dazzled. Suspended in the wind of his flight was the cloak of invisibility. It blew back to reveal a chest of plated metal, an ox-neck bigger than his nut, polished oak biceps. Wham. Eeeeek. Zadig, evil Venusian ruler, caught the hammer force of a fist hurled in close-up, and his domed head over saucer eyes cracked against the acre of switchboard. Pelota opened her lovely mouth — whose painted outline had slipped a fraction — in refined tones of gratitude and relief. Her deliriously heavy bosom seemed sustained by invisible wires.

Little Mimms stood sheltered in the coign of the play-ground, breathing with open mouth over the coloured leaves of his *Super-Space-Man* comic. A dry, vile, liverish wind made shifting dust patterns on the grey yard. The children sucked their regulation milk through straws and chased and hit each other dispiritedly, longing for the warm fug of the class-room.

`What,' asked Rich, 'are you reading, kid? Give us a look.'

The child slid back through interplanetary space and gawped at the reappearance of the usual — leaden gravity and secondary colours. 'Eh?' he said, bewildered.

`Bare tarts,' commented Rich, grabbing the comic. 'At your age, too.' He turned the pages with no show of interest. A living corpse drooled. A woman, all nylon stockings, pre-

pared to be mangled by a train. Another woman faced the ineffably horrible with a screaming gob. 'I'll have a look at this,' said Rich. He remembered the sarcastic words of Howarth when Howarth had caught him snorting over some weak piece of pornography during a German lesson: `A little light relaxation from your studies, eh, Rich?' Rich said to Mimms: 'This will be a little light relaxation from my studies.' He remembered *some* things from his lessons.

`Give it us back,' said Mimms.

`Corruption,' said Rich, remembering some old bearded bugger in Greece done to death with Hamlet or somebody. `Corruption of the young. A disgrace, that's what it is.' Young Howarth went by. 'Talks posh, like his dad,' commented Rich.

`It's not mine, that isn't,' said Mimms. 'I only borrowed it, see. Give it back.'

`I'm only borrowing it, too,' said Rich. 'You make an appointment,' he said, 'with my secker terry to see me at dinner-time. Then we'll see what we can do.' He scrubbed the child's scalp with his knuckles. Gilpin went by, riding a little girl's bicycle as in a circus turn, the ugliest boy in the school. Rich gazed in brief admiration. Mimms kicked Rich on the shin. 'Hit a man off his guard, eh?' said Rich. `Treachery, that's what it is.' He dealt a ringing smack to the child's blue starved ear. Mimms, no longer facing Zadig the evil Venusian ruler, started to cry. Rich burst into a fine loud parody of sobbing.

Then bells rang the children back to work: to Mr Turton or Mr Stopworth or Miss Fry for English, Mr Howarth for German. Dr Gardner or Miss Rivers for French, Mr Gay or Miss Ankers for P.T., Mr Begbie or Mr Yews for Geography, Mr Keyte or Miss Granville for History, Mr Fenton for Art, Mr Ennis for Music, Mrs Connor or Mr Prout for Mathematics, Miss Griggs for Latin, and for Science Mrs Wilson

or Mr Brewster — not, this particular period, Mr Lodge.

Mr Lodge, master on duty, saw Mimms with a gargoyle mask and a fist raised to his eye, a silent Eisenstein frame among the barks and, howls and chatter of the boys and girls going in. Mr Lodge went over to Mimms and said:

`What's the matter — er?' He had no memory for names.

"E 'it me ! 'Im ! Owwwwww !' Mimms knuckled further tears into a glowing prism. His free hand pointed blindly.

`Rich?' That was one name Mr Lodge knew. Why did he know it? He couldn't think why he knew it. He saw Rich fighting his way into school, as into the pictures. Rich tea biscuits was the name on some old tin or other containing chalk. No, he had to see Rich. The Headmaster had so instructed him. Something Rich had stolen from Linda something. A form-mate. Mr Lodge conjured a mnemonic. $C_{\text{„}}$ $H_{22}{}^{\circ}{}_{11}$. Sugar. Honey. Hair the colour of? Linda Chorlton. CHO. And that was somebody's telephone number, wasn't it? Not here, however, surely? When he had worked up in the North. Manchester. Was the Hardy, then, a river?

`Don't cry.' He patted the boy's shoulder. Like patting a bicycle. Children were so unreal. 'Everything's all right.' The last child was in. No, there was this child. 'Go to your class now,' said Mr Lodge. He moved on gravely.

Inside the school building, on the chocolate-coloured corridor, he sniffed the smell of school appreciatively. He entered his form-room and, in that dark, smelling hole, found his form raging and lolloping. He saw Rich, but no sugar-hair. You have baked me too brown. Marlene Brown, normally next to her, she was not there either. CHO. He saw many unfamiliar faces among the known. This was a trick. They were all doing what they wanted to now. Rearranging themselves into forms of their own. Automorph . . . The termination slid away into a kind of undergrowth of satchels

and dismal dog-eared books. He said, quite gently:

`Silence.' They became silent, frightened of his abstraction and indifference, which they did not understand. Noise, rage, pleading: these were different, part of the heroic world of Grendel and Beowulf, Hector and Achilles, who were each themselves, after all, a sort of school-child, Grendel not unlike Gilpin. 'There are,' said Mr Lodge, 'people here who should not be here. Where is the rest of the form?'

They began to answer, all at once, patient to explain, anxious that he, who was above these things, should understand.

`It's Maths now, sir. We split up, sir, for Maths. We go into Sets, sir. This is Set A. It's different for Maths, sir. The clever ones together, sir, and the stupid ones together, sir. The stupid ones are in Set B. We're the good ones, sir. The good ones go together, you see, sir.'

`Silence.' Silence exploded again. 'But there is nobody here in charge. Where is your teacher?'

`Mr Prout, sir. Always late, sir.' Meldrum answered alone, taking from his mouth a finger-nail bitten down deliciously to the quick. Give it an hour or so and it would be seen to have grown again, there would be more to nibble. Oh, delectable.

`Now,' said Lodge, 'no master is ever late. Time resides in the teacher, and not in the clock. Your time sense is at fault. You pay too much attention to your own clock-bound limited sense of time.' He could introduce to them gradually some notion of Relativity. Though he had not thought this to be his lesson now. After break he normally smoked, quietly reading, in the staff-room. There must be a change of time-table. But he did not teach Physics any longer, only Chemistry. This was strange. Into something rich and strange. Light bubbled down, full fathom five. Thy father lies. Of his bones are phosphor made. P. Yes, that too. **P.**

Having had two cups of coffee at break.

`Rich.' He surveyed gravely the pug-nosed boy in the front row. 'I have to see you, Rich. You stole something, Rich.'

`I only borrowed it, sir. He can have it back now, sir. Only a comic, sir. Or rather, sir,' said Rich, feeling inspiration vibrate like a train coming, 'what I mean to say, sir, is that it's all wrong reading things like this. Shouldn't be allowed, sir. A bad, moral influence,' he said proudly (having once, in the first form, been called that). He held out the scrofulous limp tricolour.

Of his bones are morals made. 'But it was something else, Rich. Something stolen from a girl. Linda.' CHO. He looked mildly at the boy's dishonest and clever face, then rotated his head to find Linda. But, he remembered, she was somewhere else. Mathematics for the not-so-clever. 'A book, Rich.'

'I didn't steal anything,' said. Rich. 'She lent it to me.'

`Well, she wants it back, Rich. Bring it out here.'

`I haven't got it here, sir.' Rich looked about furtively. 'It's at home.'

`That's not true, sir,' called out Flossie. 'He's got it with him. I seen it, sir.'

Rich turned to her and uttered a brief and nasty word. Mr Lodge said:

`We'll see, won't we? Yes, yes, we'll see,' in a rather parsonical tone. He ambled to Rich's scarred desk. 'What sort of a book is it?'

`Her diary, sir,' cried Flossie. 'It's private, that's what it is.'

`I didn't ask you, er,' said Mr Lodge. He couldn't remember her first name. Her second name? Something to do with salt, though he couldn't think why. Had she spilt it in the dining-hall? NaCI. Mad. Maclean, Macleod, some-

thing. Or was this the same girl? She did not seem to have a Scottish accent.

`I've got no diary,' said Rich sullenly. 'I thought you meant something else, another book. There's nothing in my desk.' He had been a fool, really, to bring it, but he hadn't been able to find one safe enough hiding-place in the whole house full of kids. Power. With that book he would have her where he wanted her, when he wanted her. And as for him He had lain awake last night dreaming of blackmail. But how much better to be the only one in the school who could, with a wrist-flick, send packing the man at the top. If he wanted to. He didn't want to, not yet he didn't. One thing at a time. 'Look if you like,' said Rich. `There's nothing in here.' Mr Lodge looked down and saw only exercise books, fat torn text-books, a plastic pencil-box.

`Your bag, Rich. Or satchel. Whichever you prefer to call it.'

`That's my own,' said Rich. 'It's private. It's my lunch.' He felt a sudden shame. Why should they look at his lunch? His mother, heavy with the next one, cutting bread in the winter's morning. 'This is good dripping. Eat all your sandwiches, now.' Rich held the greasy leather bag to his loins. Mr Lodge tugged with no apparent sense of loss of dignity and, wresting it away from Rich, spilled the contents. A parcel of crinkled bread-paper fell, also a greenish banana. Some of the girls giggled.

`Pick them up, Rich. As you don't seem to have the book in question, perhaps you'd better come with me. To explain to the Headmaster, that is.' Lodge had lost interest. He had been asked to get some book or other from Rich to give back to this girl. He had done what he could; now let someone else deal with the matter. He wanted the staff-room gas-fire, his bubbling pipe, the little volume of Elizabethan lyrics he had found yesterday in the sixth-form room. A

science man should have an interest in the humanities.

Mr Prout limped in, breathing through his mouth, his nude scalp shining with obscene and shameless age among the young.

`This boy,' said Mr Lodge, pointing to a shiny seat (Rich picking up his banana), 'is to come with me.'

`Excellent,' said Mr Prout. 'Now,' he addressed the class. `How many of you have bicycles? Good, good. Perhaps some day you will need to measure the area of its front or rear wheel. Now, if we know the radius . . .' The class sighed. They could not even remotely imagine ever wanting to know the area of a bicycle wheel. Why didn't the bloody old fool say that they were going to do the area of a circle and leave it at that? Soon he would say: 'This pi, of course, is not, ha ha, meant to be eaten.' Teachers. God help us.

`Sir,' said Rich to Mr Lodge as they walked down the corridor together, 'sir, could I talk to you first?'

`Talk to me?'

`Yes, sir.' Rich heard the waters of inspiration lapping again. 'About this diary. Privately, sir.'

`Privately, eh?' They had to pass the men's staff-room on their way to the Headmaster's office. Lodge paused at the door. 'Why, Rich, why?'

`Indecency, sir,' whispered Rich.

`Indecency, eh?' Lodge did not see why not. A quiet pipe and Rich talking about indecency. He opened the staff-room door and bade Rich follow him in. The buff walls gently peeled and sweated. The one table was littered with old football boots, a couple of stained jerseys, a scout-pole, a table-tennis net, a tray of dirty cups and an academic gown that was torn to shreds. There were two old arm-chairs and a gas-fire. Stuffed with bromoid memories, this room was to Lodge an eighteen years' home, a place that accepted and, in some obscure way, was identifiable with him. Only Fenton

the art master sat there now, pulling a wing of his moustache and reading an aviation magazine. Lodge said:

`Would you mind? I mean, Rich has something to tell me. About indecency. If you could possibly . . . just for a few minutes.'

`Not at all,' said Fenton. He rose to say: 'I was just going for a tomtit, anyway. Indecency, eh? Well, well.' He ape-shambled out, as if going to his aircraft.

`Now, Rich,' said Lodge. Before sitting down he lit his pipe with a strip from an old notice that said: 'DUTIES FOR END OF TERM.' Rich stood before him and began:

`Well, I didn't like saying it before the others, sir, if you see what I mean. I came across this diary, you see, sir, just by accident, as it might be yourself, and I just happened to read a page, sir. I didn't know it was meant to be private, sir, or naturally I wouldn't have, sir.'

`Naturally not.'

`Well, that's where the indecency comes in, sir, for it was real indecent. It struck me as being disgraceful, writing things like that, especially a young girl, sir, if you don't mind me saying so. So if you could just warn her, sir, you being our form-master, then perhaps nobody will say no more about it and the whole thing could be dropped, sir, that being the best thing to do, the way I see it, sir.'

`Where is this diary, Rich?'

`Where, sir? Oh, sir.' Rich looked down with saintly eyes, piety oozing from a sudden dolt's face. 'Naturally, sir, I burnt it, sir.'

`You burnt it? You had no right, Rich.' Lodge saw the smug jowl of an inquisitor. *Eppur si muove.* The ethical issue was not really clear. Who had the right to burn it? He who had the maturer appreciation of indecency? Lodge was disappointed. A young girl's indecency. Interesting, scientifically interesting. It is not your science, though.

True, true, but narrow specialisation has its dangers. The book of Elizabethan verses lay on the floor by his chair. Humane studies.

`A diary,' said Lodge, 'is a very personal thing. One's thoughts are one's own affair. We are condemned for our actions, if our actions are bad or even, in some cases, good, but our minds . . . We are entitled to think what we like.' Or are we? He puffed a judge's pipe up at Rich. But, still, to write is to utter, and utterance is action. 'You should have come to me, shown it to me. No, I see you wouldn't want to. I see that. Dear, dear.'

`What would you have thought of me, sir?' said Rich. 'It would have been embarrassing. For both of us.'

Lodge tried to visualise this embarrassment of Rich's. He failed, and, gazing up at the boy's smug mask, suddenly saw things quite clearly. His mind became alert, the laboratory lights were switched on, and he saw that Rich .. .

`I quite understand,' he said. 'You'd better go back to your lesson now. I suppose your motive was a good one.'

Rich smirked, relaxed, prepared to go. 'Thank you, sir.'

`And, Rich . .

`Sir?' He turned, ready for the moment to do anything, he had managed things beautifully. . . .

`Just let me borrow that diary, will you? I'll give it you back.'

Rich opened his mouth, confused for an instant. Absent-minded old ... 'I burnt it, sir, as I said.' With sweet patience, as to a child. Lodge was indeed an old teacher, however, and saw Rich's hand go to his right breast, recovering in a jerk, but enough.

`It's in your inside pocket. Hand it over.'

`It isn't, sir. Didn't you hear me say that I'd burnt it?' His voice was sharper, the string just a microtone off the note.

`You're a liar, Rich. It's there, in your pocket.'

`I tell you I haven't got it.' The sharpness almost touched insolence.

Lodge got up, his pipe going well, pluming away to the dirty ceiling. 'I'm going to get it, Rich.' School, of course, was all melodrama, all cowboys and Indians.

Rich was by the door. If he could get out now he could jettison the book in the corridor — anywhere: out of the window, into a rubbish-box. Then, caught, triumphantly showing nothing, he would, by God, yes, by God, he would, make Lodge apologise. The loud singing voice of Gay, P.T. master, approached. Damn it. Even now. The door opened.

`Started the little bar stewards on a bit of a run. Training for the cross-country.' Gay, grizzled, eupeptic, small, upright, in teddy-bear track-suit. He saw Rich. 'You in the staff-room? What you doing here? Out, brother.' He saw Lodge. 'I beg pardon, Mr Lodge. Didn't know you was . .

`Hold him,' said Lodge on the films. 'Hold him, quick.'

`Eh?' But Gay had Rich's arms, vice-tight. Ask questions later. Anyway, it was always them that was in the wrong, that stood to reason. Rich back-kicked with his worn rubber heels. 'Kicking, eh?' said Gay. 'A so-and-so donkey.' He squeezed tighter.

Lemme gow,' howled Rich. 'It's not bleedin' fair, two to one, yer bastards !'

Lodge, pipe still going lovely, dipped into the gap between Rich's worn jacket and more worn pullover and pulled out, like a chestnut from the fire, a little book in blue leatherette. He flicked the pages. A small neat hand, that of a girl. A day to a half-page. Stray words twittered like tits: . . *in the pictures . . . kiss like that . . . French homework . . . to tea . . !*

`And as for that language,' said Gay, shocked, still holding on, 'I don't know where you picked that lot up, I just don't.'

Rich, as though thus encouraged, said, with a wide and agonised mouth: 'Sods. A filthy trick, that's what it is. I'll have you, the bloody lot of you. You pinched it, that's what you done. I'll have the police on you, I'll write to the *Sunday Pictorial,* bloody thieves . .

let him go, please,' said Lodge. The dirty words and threats he saw as no real breach of discipline, any more than the comedones and the dirty shirt — a natural emanation, the way Rich's father would perhaps respond to the strong grip of coppers. Rich, released, rubbed his arms, thought of raising fists for murder, collapsed, with his rag of a tie, into a sniveller.

`What's it all about?' Gay, panting a bit, came round with long-sighted eyes to look over, see 'what it was, book of some kind. In the w.c. next door water sang explosively. Fenton had finished his tomtit.

`We'll say no more about it, Rich,' sighed Lodge. 'You forgot yourself, that's all. You can go now. It's all over. Don't do it again.' For it was such a bore to have to initiate formal punishments.

`What's he been doing?' asked Gay. 'If it's pinching . .

`It's all over,' said Lodge. Rich limped, rags of misery, out, a wreck, muttering pity for his shattered image. But behind the cracked sky the armed goddess, mouth open in a war-cry, began to float, the camera tracking to close-up.

`Thank you, Mr Er,' said Lodge. 'You came at the right time. He stole a book from a girl and then he denied it.'

`Always was a liar.' Gay lit the charred end of a fag-butt. `Told me his mother didn't want him to do P.T. Not strong enough, that's what he said she said. Letter and all he brought. He'd forged it, the little. I saw his mother when it

was the school play, that Shakespeare one about Bottom. Never written any such letter, she says. She said, the more P.T. he has the better she'll be pleased. So, by God, what do I do? I give the little bee a work-out. No good sending him to the old man, because what will he do? Sweet F.A., that's what he'll do. So he has this work-out, stripped right down. Sweat? Sweat, did you say? You never seen anything like it.' Gay pulled a long hair from his nose, giving it a sharp tug like a weed. 'I didn't care much for that swearing just now. It's your what-you-call, I know, but there's a bloody sight too much. Foul mouths, that's what it is. Still, if they're not given a bloody good work-out from the top, so to speak, what can us poor bar stewards do, eh? That's the whole trouble, way I see it.'

Lodge, listening to none of this, stepped backwards to his chair by the gas-fire, reading the indecent confessions of a schoolgirl. Indecent? He couldn't find any indecency. He read: *'Old Lodger the Roger today wandered off and talks boring about speed of light being always the same, and .75 c+.5c= i* c, *which is impossible. Hockey and got wet. For tea corn-flakes, buns, currant bread, fish-paste, 5 biscuits. Daphne come round and we see Yanks by Town Hall. Chemical warfare, one of them is called Helmholz and has smashing hair, real natural wavy. Home with Daphne. Finish homework in bed.'* Lodge felt himself to be the indecent one. Once, as a boy, in his darkened bedroom, he had watched a woman in the house opposite going to bed. He had only seen her comb her hair, trying it in different partings, posturing, admiring, looking sidelong at the back view in the mirror. Still, it was the intention, wasn't it? He felt the same shame now as he had felt then, along with a certain perverse pricking of the flesh. A young girl exciting herself with carnal visions. Holy also; Saint Teresa and her heart being pierced by the heavenly bridegroom. *'Talked about*

lT with Daphne, and she says she knows a girl who used to . • •

No, no, he would not. He knew too much already, knew that he was called Lodger the Roger, that they thought that equation about light was a lunatic piece of arithmetic, that Daphne knew a girl who used to. Lodge saw a vista of things it was too late to want to know. He was long committed to his cold celibate digs, his books and arid formula, the routine of too many terms. He glanced almost shyly now at the volume of Elizabethan lyrics. As for the diary, he would give it back to her. Linda CHO. He let it rest on his knee and then opened the volume of verse.

`By God,' exclaimed Gay at the window, 'they're coming back. Think I can't see them, the little.' Once round the block and then a nice shivering skulk in the urinals. Little Tipwell, with the farmer's belly; Cross, with the sunken chest; Ambler, Jones with the glasses, Churn, all teeheeing like tarts. 'By God.' Gay drank the remains of his fag-end and then ran off on light middle-aged dancing-man's toes. A work-out. He slammed the door. His puffed-out smoke rode the airless room like ectoplasm.

Lodge read:

> `Call unto his funeral dole
> The ant, the fieldmouse and the mole,
> To rear him hillocks, that shall keep him warm.'

He felt a quite unusual sort of pity for himself, reading that. It was his own dirge, exequies for one whose children had been other people's, unremembered — except as somebody who had once taught, in a boring digression, some idiocy about the velocity of light, disregarded. Lodge's pipe had gone out.

The gas-fire answered his own abstracted stare with

purring sticks of flame. And in pursuing truth . . . Had he pursued truth? The work on sugars he had never completed. C and H and 0 danced before his eyes to the gas-fire's music, taking dwarf partners, changing partners, 12 22 11, 5 to 5, 6 12 6. Square or cube dancing, like that they had in the school hall on Fridays, Linda CHO, smashing lumps with sugar hair. He dozed off, drugged by the stealthy gas-leak, to Portland stone smashed with hammers. Gargoyles appeared. A sodden boy's voice was heard.

From sleep in the strange ship's cabin he was called by bells ringing for lifeboat drill. He awoke startled to find he was in the staff-room. Morning school was over, the bell meant duty. He let this cool, like morning tea. His mind was quite clear, he knew what he had to do: supervise the meal, not forgetting to say grace. And he had to return a book. Perhaps he could find another copy in the library. He went off coughing in his old gown, his eyes bleary from the gas-fire, clutching the volume of Elizabethan lyrics. A young girl's indecency lay shy and silent on the floor, among black tobacco ash and feathery coils of fluff. The bells now inaugurated a brief mad period of noise. Into this solid cacophony masters' voices tried to pierce like hammered nails. Out of the storm of noise two figures reached shore, hanging up their gowns like votive garments on the hooks behind the staff-room door. Howarth said:

`If you want me to be honest about it, I must confess that it's a bit of a shock. I don't begrudge you your new-found dignity and all that, but . . . Well, damn it all, you might have been honest. I thought you were just using the stuff for sixth-form work.'

Dr Gardner grinned pleasantly. 'You said I could borrow it,' he said. 'And if you weren't prepared to make anything out of it, well, can you blame me for doing what I did? I mean, it's just facts, after all. Facts you got from books. .

`It was hard work getting them from books,' said Howarth, sitting down and taking out his Woodbines. 'Damned hard work.' Dr Gardner took out a shining tin of Benson and Hedge's and offered Howarth a more opulent smoke. The expensive brand fitted his personality and dress; Gardner looked like the manager of a very good cinema in his heavy-framed spectacles and grey serge, well-fitting, well-pressed. He had a bald business-man's dome, over which were draped strips of straight black hair; he lacked a neck, however, and from his squat body a kind of obscene heat radiated. 'Your trouble, Chris,' he said, 'is that you know too much. Have you ever thought of that? No. Well, you can't blame an ignorant bastard like me for gulping the odd drop from the barrel. Plenty more where that came from.'

Howarth melted a little, the flabby hot-water-bottle of flattery laid to his back. 'Still,' he said, 'you might have told me. I thought of getting down to that thesis again some time. It might help. It might have helped,' he amended. `Now it's all wasted.'

`Not at all wasted,' said Gardner. 'Not wasted at all. Your name goes first among the acknowledgments. You'll see it when it comes out.'

`It's being published?'

`Oh yes, it's being published. I'm very grateful, Chris. It seems that you hit on a good line there.'

`Well,' said Howarth. 'Of all the bloody fools ..

But,' said Gardner, 'don't shout it out too much, Chris. About your share in it, I mean. You and I understand. You and I are scholars. But there are some here, you know, and I needn't mention any names, need I? There are some, especially that moron at the top . .

`It's a bit too late to do any shouting, isn't it?' said Howarth.

`You do shoot your mouth off, you know. Not that you

haven't been right occasionally. This school needs somebody to speak out. Anyway, you have, whichever way you look at it, contributed something . .

`To your rise to academic distinction?'

`Don't be silly. To learning, to a deeper knowledge of the influence of the ancients on classical French literature. I mean, the honour and the glory don't really count, do they?'

`Don't they?'

Gardner, who was sitting in the neighbour chair, put his podgy arm on Howarth's shoulder. Howarth could hear the complacent tick of Gardner's expensive wrist-watch. 'You're a bloody good type, Chris. I've always said that. Come round for a drink this evening. I've got a few bottles in. We really ought to celebrate, oughtn't we?'

`Tonight I've got to apply for another job. A job in a grammar school in Birmingham. The same sort of job as this, but it carries a fifty-pound responsibility allowance. That's a lot of money to the likes of me.' Not,' reflected Howarth, looking at Gardner, `to the likes of him, however.' A month ago his father had died and left him seven thousand.

`You penniless bastard. Listen.' Gardner tightened his arm's embrace and brought his breath nearer. 'Don't leave. Don't try to leave. Give it a few more months. There may be changes.'

`What do you mean?'

`Changes. And if you can't come round tonight . . Gardner pulled a wallet out and extracted two five-pound notes. 'I'm giving you, Chris, strict instructions to buy yourself a few bottles. You and your wife can drink my health at home. Now, I insist. This is an order. As head of the Languages Department I have a certain authority.'

`I can't take that,' said Howarth, taking it. He saw a paid-off coal bill. Pride? Leave that to the artisans. Was there, he

thought, anything really more important than money? We tell our pupils to pursue spiritual values, but you can even buy those. You can buy anything. You can buy Christopher Howarth for ten quid. Nay, five.

The rest of the male staff began to come in. Keyte with his big ears; Begbie with his bad shave — a patch of black nap and a red razor-cut under his chin; Yews with his stiff boy scout's walk; Stopworth the handsome; Brewster with the cheesy, moony yokel's face; Turton the exquisite, with his chromatic scale of giggles and his hands, three-ringed, always ready to dismiss the stink of authors he disliked. Entering, he puckered his faun's face and intoned:

`Fie, what a scent is here. Somebody's pipe. The earliest pipe of unawakened birds. After the fetor of 3B, this is too much.'

`It was you in there, was it, Wilfred?' asked Yews, ordering arms with his scout-pole. 'It sounded like someone holding a party.'

`Throwing a party,' corrected Turton. 'This party, very nearly. *Murder in the Cathedral* we were doing. I was Thomas, and, my dear, the things those four sancticidal knights would have done to me. Quite agonising, I assure you. And then the chorus wanted to carry off my body. Those great big fishwifely harridans.'

`Doctor,' said Keyte to Gardner. 'How about prescribing me a couple of days off, doctor?' He grinned and scratched the corner of his mouth, opening his lips to look like a trick money-box. 'Or aren't you that sort of doctor, doctor?' Begbie gave an empty shout of laughter.

Gallimard, the French assistant, entered. He turned in a rage to Gardner, narrowing cunning provincial eyes. His hair was close-cropped and he wore an English sports jacket over high-hitched blue jeans. *`Ce gars-la,'* he hissed. 'Gilpin. *Et son co pain. Je voudrais leur donner un de ces somni-*

fères . . . les accommoder à dix-sept sauces differentes .. . un bon presse-purée dans les gencives ..

`Take it easy,' said Gardner. `*Soyez calme.*' He sounded like an Englishman speaking French. 'You don't understand our way of doing things You must learn the liberal philosophy. They're very, very good really, and terribly anxious to learn. That's our English way.'

Begbie guffawed. Always ready for a laugh.

`You mustn't cross the dear little things,' said Gardner. `You must let them ride over you roughshod.'

`Roffshud?' M Gallimard began to search for his vocabulary book.

'I'll explain that another time.' Gardner settled his glasses more comfortably on his nose. 'What I mean, my dear Jean, is that you mustn't take this as a *typical* British grammar school. What we need is a strong hand at the top. What we need is a headmaster.'

`But you 'ave one.' Gallimard looked mystified; an English joke?

`All right,' said Howarth quietly. 'There's no need to start that again.'

`I'm starting nothing.' Gardner looked at Howarth in a new chill way. `I'm just saying what we all say, every one of us, all the time.'

`Well,' said Howarth, 'it's hardly decent before a non-member of the staff.'

`He's one of us, aren't you, Jean?' Gardner got up (time for lunch, anyway) and put his arm round the assistant's waist. Gallimard grinned, shy, sheepish, not understanding. `And don't be such a bloody prig, Christopher Howarth.'

`Well,' said Howarth, 'he's sincere. He's humane. He's got ideals . .

But he just isn't a headmaster,' said Gardner.

`He won't like it when you come down the aisle in your

doctoral red,' grinned Keyte. 'Can't stand the sight of blood.'

Blood. They began to drift off to the dining-hall. (Slice of mutton, tinned rhubarb, sago pudding.) There were sounds of rushing water and chains being pulled in the cloakroom next door.

`Woolson,' said Gardner, 'as you very well know, is a .. He picked up the little leatherette diary from the floor. 'A weak-kneed, wishy-washy . . .' He flicked over the leaves idly. 'This is a diary kept by some kid. Out-of-date liberal, that's what he is. I say.' His voice grew somewhat excited. `Have you seen this?'

`What is it?' asked Howarth.

`A diary. A girl's diary.' He looked at the name on the fly-leaf. 'Linda Hardy. Fourth form. But my God. Look at this.'

Howarth leaned over and read: *'Mr Woolton had me in his study to tell me off about being late. But he didn't tell me off. He asked me to sit down in his chair. He said don't* ***be*** *frightened* ***I*** *am not going to punish you. He said you have awfully nice hair and he started to stroke it. Then he said do you mind if* ***I*** *put my hand down there. And then he said will you give me a kiss. So* ***I*** *did and he said come again tomorrow. And at the door before he opened it he did it again.'*

`God Almighty,' said Gardner, 'is he such a bloody fool? Look here, there's more of it. *"This time he made me lie down."* ***I*** can't believe it. He just couldn't. But it's here.'

`Oh,' said Howarth, 'it's nothing. Erotic fantasy. Fertile imagination. It's common in girls at that age.' But he felt slightly sick, slightly ashamed.

`This doesn't read like imagination,' said Gardner. 'Look. She sandwiches this sort of thing between quite pedestrian things. Hair washed. The pictures. Shoes let in water.'

`It's not possible,' said Howarth. 'He wouldn't be so stupid.'

`Wouldn't he?' said Gardner bluntly. 'He's getting to the

dangerous age. You know, clergymen in railway carriages. And his wife's half-way round the bend. He's probably getting starved of it.'

Starved of it. The path was so easy, thought Howarth: an encouraging hand on her shoulder, a smack on her buttock as she goes down the corridor, a kiss in the dark at a school party.

`Anyway,' said Gardner, 'there it is, in black and white. God knows how it got in here.' He turned the little book over and over, as looking for wheels or wings. 'This is dynamite.' He put it in his inside pocket. 'Dynamite It needs thinking about.'

Howarth said nothing If he had taken action yesterday afternoon . . . But one just doesn't think, doesn't realise.

`Burn it,' he advised. 'Throw it away. We don't want any more trouble.'

`Don't we?' said Gardner loudly. 'Don't we?' He grinned. `Sometimes, Chris, I wonder about you. One doesn't burn this sort of thing.'

Gallimard was waiting, patient with his pencil and notebook. `Raffshot?' he asked.

`Roughshod,' said Gardner. 'It means . . . Well, to ride roughshod means . . . You tell him, Chris.'

Four

HOWARTH sat, that night, in his empty house. His wife and his son were at the cinema in the town, and he was left with the clock and the cat for company, and for task the filling-in of an application-form. His heart sickened with the promise of boredom as he contemplated for the fiftieth time since last summer the dry duty of trying to sell himself to a snowed-under education authority. Some man undoubtedly had already been promised the job: a slick, clever youngster keen on games, or a quick smart darting beetle like Gardner. Howarth fingered the notes Gardner had given: they were still in his trouser-pocket, as for spending soon; he had not put them in his wallet. He had not told Veronica about them and he had thought better of paying his coal bill with them.

The clock kept on marching round the room, stiff and expressionless. The Siamese cat Sirikit yawned, curling its long thin tongue, then stretched up from its hot bed in the hearth. It contemplated the stewpan on the electric cooker, looked contemptuously at the husband of its mistress, then leapt on to the edge of the sink. Pausing there to give its brown face a quick wash, it then thudded on to the top of the cold stove. Placing its right paw in the handle of the stewpan lid, it lifted this off with ease, holding it like a cymbal, then it fished with its left paw in the greasy piscina of the pan, after a titbit. Howarth watched, fascinated. `Down from there !' he yelled. With a cymbal-clatter the cat

streaked down, its eyes wide with momentary fear. It crouched under a chair, watching him, questioning his right. It would get him later.

Name: HOWARTH. Christopher Gerard.

Age: 39 years. 3 months. z days.

Date of Birth:

Were they so damned lazy that they couldn't work out the one from the other?

Married or *Single:* Married. That's all they want to know, he thought. Would they perhaps like to hear how it all began?The Christmas parties and parish dances. *Les neiges d'antan.* The jolly groups to midnight Mass, the petting on the stairs all night, waiting to see Christmas come up on the horizon. The Catholic names: Monica, Teresa, Mary, Agnes, Bernadette. There was no way out. Winifred, Joan, Veronica. One of them would get you. The merry priests, at dances, drinking with the boys and girls, telling a very nearly dirty story. Gin and alt one of them had drunk, alt being altar-wine. One of the lads. The quiet, suddenly serious, man-to-man, heart-to-heart. 'She's a fine girl, Christopher. Her family would like it very much. And you can see for yourself. The way she looks at you.'

Married.

Children: One. A boy. Undoubtedly mine

In his boredom his flesh stirred, as though the whole house lay abandoned, languorous, languishing, limbs spread, waiting. This damnable sex, Christopher. Yes, Father. He got up and paced around the narrow kitchen-living-room, smoking. That young girl's diary. He shouldn't have let Gardner get away with that; he should have tussled with Gardner and wrested it from him; he should then have flung the two five-pound notes back at him. It was a queer and disturbing life, being surrounded daily by young flesh, watching the shy slow blossoming of childish breasts, the

rounded flanks growing yet rounder. We had all felt guilty desire, justifying ourselves with quotations from Aristotle, especially that one about the ideal age-ratio — man thirty-five, girl seventeen. Seeing in his mind a dim bust of the lean Stagyrite, he set it in a white colonnade by the Mediterranean, then he became hungry for olives.

But was it safer to court Hilda Connor? Indiscreet, also double adultery. He saw her sturdy legs in hockey dress. `Come on, girls !' Yet he had smelt Schiaparelli's *Shocking* on her (having first seen the vial in her handbag), and had admired the slim blood-tipped fingers that gripped a vicious marking pencil. Her eyes had been warm lately. Her husband was away, a major Of Engineers, and she kept house with her mother, waiting for leaves and week-ends. Her home, in the village on the other side of the town, was antipodeal to his own. The name of the village — Rodforth — crackled in his mind, crepitated like silk underclothes. She would be marking maths books now, her body fallow. Did the coming of spring simmer in her? He turned back, sighing out smoke, to his task.

Education: St Aloysius's Memorial School, Brantwich. The nun with the sweet face, the bespectacled sister-headmistress with the strap for latecomers. Sister Anastasia. 'What does this mean?' Furtively, in the stinking urinal, the lingam-yoni sign, spear into grail, stubby finger into loose-clenched fist. 'Say *Puck* like this.' Fingers tugging hard, hooked into mouth-corners. His first lesson in Phonetics: the law of organic necessity.

St John Bosco's. Patron saint of studies. The mad Irish headmaster, Brother Antoninus, who told the duller boys, in his holy-smelling study, about the whole appalling mystery of pubescence, demonstrating with *hoi phalloi.* His own diary of religious doubts, found by the headmaster, burnt in the boiler-room, *auto-da-fe.* 'Now kneel down,

Howarth me boy, and pray with me. Ask the Blessed Virgin for guidance.' A lay History master had taken him out drinking and encouraged him to lose his faith. That had been the spring of youth's year. Swallows circling, and he an owl blinking against the light. Rows over Easter duties, and then the weak return to conformity.

Hilda Connor had asked, one lunch-time in the men's staff-room: 'Do you believe in hell and all that sort of thing?'

`I don't believe anything now.'

`But you do, you know. Your eyes blaze when someone says a word against your Church.'

`It's not my Church any more.' She had shifted a nylon limb and smiled, asking, banteringly:

`Sin. What is sin?'

Eager to define, explain, he had told the listening staff-room about sin. They all listened, holding coffee-cups. Then the old argument, Pelagian versus Augustinian. She notices my eyes. She notices that I notice her. Her warmth reached across to him from where she sat, the entire staff crammed, according to custom, for after-lunch chatter.

`Morals are one's own concern. If I want to go out with another man — if — then nothing will stop me. One's faithful because one wants to be.'

`Really, Hilda!' The duennas, her colleagues, whom only time's finger has touched, giggle protest.

`And I like to swim naked.' That was another occasion, when holidays approached. 'Do you swim, Christopher?' She looked at him with smiling eyes. Naked.

`I swim a little, not very well.'

University: Provincial, redbrick, the French—German course. Ablaut and the Minnesingers in cold rooms overlooking grey working streets, the dreary wastes of *Faust.* The two voices called: the German woods, Luther barking among the tree-gods, the grey seas yelping, making one confused

song; France and the decaying Catholic vision, logic, Latin, wine, peasants blessing themselves, making another, less confused.

The clock marched on, and his pen wrote down the dry facts. War service and the wearisome blustering interrogation of German prisoners. The end and the wild spending.

Previous Posts Held: Assistant master at St Olave's terminated on death of father and legacy (compare Gardner's, Dr Gardner's case) of two hundred and fifty pounds. I had met Pecriaux during the war. I wrote to Pecriaux, saying that now I had a little capital to put into his proposed venture. Exchange difficulties overcome by a wangle. The idea was a private school in Normandy, summer school as well. Money in it undoubtedly.

The blank space in the application form yawned, waited.

I was to teach English, German, a few other things Oh, it worked well enough for a time.

The blue Normandy sea and the clean Normandy bars. The liqueur bottles shaped like footballers. (I taught a little football, too, if you could call it teaching.) Sweet fire poured from the footballer's head, like wisdom from the head of Jove. And then those others with four spouts, fascinating. And wine in the little shops. The bottle on the scorching beach, the failure to cool it in the depths of the sand, in the tepid sea. Pernod, water-clouded, cool, insidious.

Madame Pecriaux was a sunburnt blonde, slim, elegant, from Lille. It was all very foolish. Shame suffused Howarth as he bowed his head, his pen idle in his fingers. I did not feel in the least tight. I just thought that Madame Pecriaux had, by an odd flick of her brown eyes (and that is an irresistible combination: yellow hair and brown eyes), indicated that I might, if I wished, there was nothing to stop me.

The shocked mouthful of French. 'Now,' I thought, 'I am getting to the heart of the language, hearing the language

undressed.' But the scream for Henri, Henri. And Pecriaux coming down, understanding all, his talking hands and then his clumsy fist. And explaining it. Veronica thought I was joking.

The bilious Channel, and Peter ill at Folkestone. Peter very ill. Something to do with water, the doctor said. And now, older than his year-mates, late to the grammar school, growing steadily into a world where he too should have the big chance.

What big chance? How? Howarth thought of the gin-buying paunched magnates of the town, haw-hawing in the best town pubs with their dendropod wives, the best nylons filming their varicose veins. 'Got an account here. Goes on expenses. Doubles again? Can't park the new Bentley in that old coaching-yard.'

To hell with guilt. I refuse to feel guilty. I propose to myself the luxury of an affair, buying gin in my best overcoat, the slow process of verbal seduction. Three cheers for life. I will live. I can't afford it, but I have ten pounds. I shall get further banknotes from Gardner. I shall corrupt myself in order that I may live. I shall not oppose whatever Gardner proposes.

Howarth looked at the time and almost panicked. But he calmed himself. Why did she insist on being met at the bus-stop? Was it so that he should not be seduced into sleep, head bowed on to the unfilled-in application-form? Was it meant to be a sort of show of husbandly eagerness: I miss you so much even when you're away for just a couple of hours, I rush to meet you? Howarth scrawled his signature at the bottom of page two of the application-form, took from a drawer in the Welsh dresser three copies of three separate testimonials (one of them from Gardner: he put a note to the effect that Gardner was no longer just an M.A.), stuffed all into a long envelope, scribbled the address (Director of

Education, County Offices . . .), affixed the stamp with a thumped fist, and went out to post this attempt to better himself, the post-box being on the way to the bus-stop.

It was cold out; spring was still a dream of the day. He thrust the letter, as if it were rubbish, glad to be rid of it, into the square mouth. Say *Puck* like this. He strode the few hundred yards to the bus-stop. Lad-and-girl love waited there, one flesh in the dark, he telling her all about football. Happy happy happy pair. An old man leaned on his strod, drawing on a chest of phlegm to make echo cough, spitting near his square boot. Soon the bus came, a dragon of light.

`It was smashing, Dad,' said Peter. He began eagerly to tell the story of the main film. Gigantic underwater man-eaters like mammoth shrimps invaded the earth but were eventually wiped out by means of atomic guns; this happened in America, on the Pacific coast. A supporting cartoon was about animals that discomfited each other with side-splitting lethal though harmless devices.

`Did you enjoy it, dear?' asked Howarth. Veronica wore her three-year-old checked coat, her head the scenes-of-London scarf.

`I saw one of your staff there. Mrs Connor, with a man. Not her husband.'

Howarth felt a quiet pang of something that might be termed near-jealousy. He would have to act quickly. 'Oh, yes?' he said carelessly. 'She gets around.' It might be her brother, her brother-in-law.

`She dresses very well. Her husband's a major, isn't he?'

`Yes, and she works.'

`I'd like to see the state of her house. I don't think it's right for a wife to work. I saw your school secretary, too. We had quite a long chat in the vestibule. What exactly is going on at the school? You don't seem to tell me anything.'

'Is the door locked, Dad?'

'No,' said Howarth. Peter began to run home, full of boy's energy. 'What exactly did *she* tell you?' asked Howarth.

`Some very funny business going on with Woolton, so she says. I've never thought mixed education was right. Sex, and what not.' Sex to Veronica was always a dirty word.

`Good God,' said Howarth. Gardner had wasted no time. Or perhaps the girl herself had started to blab.

`She walked into Woolton's room and there he was, with his arms round one of your women teachers. Hysterical she was, too.'

`Oh, I see. That's all right. I know all about that. Miss Fry. Poor girl, she's not cut out for teaching.'

`It doesn't strike me that Woolton's cut out to be a headmaster. The sooner you get another job the better. And you didn't tell me you were moving into the new school next week.'

`I didn't think you'd be interested.'

`You never tell me anything, interesting or not.'

`Sorry. We're having the ceremony the day before half-term. We all move in after. Another floorboard collapsed today, and a child got an eyeful of plaster.'

`I don't see that.'

`The eyeful of plaster came from the ceiling. I should have made that clear, shouldn't I?'

`Did you apply for that job?'

`Oh, yes. I sometimes wish I were someone else, with a different curriculum vitae, as they call it. The only thing that changes is my age.'

`And mine.' Yes, and hers. 'I'm surprised at Woolton, really I am. I don't think it's at all the right place for Peter. And that Mrs Connor, so your secretary says, no better than she should be. She doesn't miss much, your school secretary.'

`What did she say about me? Honestly, she's the biggest

gossip God ever made.' Veronica considered this, wondering whether God did in fact make gossips. Then:

`She said nothing about you.' Howarth saw that soon, if he did not arrange things with extreme care, she would have plenty to say. 'Except that you were a very good teacher.'

`Oh, I am, you know.'

Tut, of course, she couldn't say anything else, could she? Not when she was talking to me.'

They had reached home. Peter was upstairs, perhaps finishing homework. The cat Sirikit climbed a chair-back, greeting her, complaining of ill-usage in her absence, trying to reach her with a brown paw.

`My pussy. My Sirikitticat. You've let the fire get very low. What have you been doing with this saucepan? What's this bone doing on the floor? I told you not to feed her; that's *my* job. And that's tomorrow's dinner, too.'

2

IN THE cosy smoke of the fashionable bar of the Dragon, Dr Gardner stood with comfortable business-men, men of his own class. Noise went on around, well-fed noise of men laughing and arguing about cars, discussing the Canary Islands for winter holidays and the cost of a really good night out in Paris. Some were back from far places, business trips, all on expenses.

`B.E.A., that's the best. As for K.L.M. . . . And that Belgian airline, SABENA ..

`Air France is pretty lavish with the champagne.'

`Old Jack Fenwick sent a postcard from Hong Kong. I've got it here somewhere. No more trips round the world for him, he says. In some of the places, he says, nobody speaks English. And his wife, he says, lost her handbag in Singa-

pore. Stolen, of course. You can't beat good old England.'

`Except in the winter, of course.'

`Except in the winter.'

Money tinkled and rustled, and the till rang tinnily continually. Gardner beamed, in his element. Doctor Gardner. Councillor Pismire said:

`How will you get on then, Herbert, doing the two jobs? Where are you going to set up your name-plate?' Gardner explained. But as for the girls behind the bar, let them carry on thinking that he was the guardian of the big soma mystery. (Look, Doctor, this lump keeps on getting bigger.' `Let me have a look, then.' There was a play by Moliere about that, wasn't there? Howarth had written about it rather well.)

`Same again, Dan?' Gardner turned to the well-dressed coal-merchant by his side, Alderman Birch. 'And you?' Councillor Pismire knocked it back. He didn't mind if he did. 'And what about you, General?' The vague mottled old man on the fringe of the drinking school wavered a 'Very kind. A Scotch and soda.'

This was, when all was said and done, the life. Gardner sighed with pleasure, being warm as toast and snug with mounting euphoria. One of poor bloody Howarth's favourites, that word. 'How much is all that, Nora?' He surveyed the ample parades of bottles, the liths of orange, the lemon-slices, the metal bowls of pretzels and cheese-straws, the contents of his bulging wallet.

`The best, Herbert.'

`All the very best.'

`Your health, sir.'

`May you live for ever and me live to bury you.' That was Alderman Birch.

`Cheerio, Herbert.'

`That was one in the eye for old whatsit, eh?' said Councillor Pismire, one of the school governors. 'You being a doctor now.'

`He's not a bad type.' Gardner was flushed and tolerant. `He's more of a scholar than I am, to tell the truth. But he just isn't a headmaster, that's all.'

`We did our best, you know, Bert,' said the coal-merchant. `It was a matter of one vote, you know. Still, you never know, one of these days ..

`I know, Dan. Don't think I'm not grateful.' Gardner downed his large gin-and-tonic. 'And,' he said with sudden solemnity, 'that day may come sooner than you think.'

`You want a man of the world in a job like that,' said Councillor Pismire. 'Like old Herbert here. And old Herbert's a doctor as well.'

`Drink up. On me.'

`No. Me.'

get these.'

`You won't. My shout.'

`Name them,' said Councillor Pismire. 'It's nearly time.'

`Yes,' said Gardner, passing his empty glass. 'It's nearly time.' He nodded. He, however, was in control of time. 'The same again, please.'

Five

A F E w more days, and four-square February had limped to its bitter end. With the opening of March the spring was willed to come. Daylight spread like a wine-stain and the tallow of night grew, inevitably, shorter, burning more strongly at both ends. In the villages the smell of farmyard dung smote the heart like a tragedy — man's transience, regret for what had not been done. The thin wine of the warming air flushed the palate with hope and sorrow. To the distant horn-call the year stirred. Soon it would begin to dress, wearing in its cap a ring as a badge.

In the suburb, lashed by the March shower, the new school stood, waiting to be unwrapped. Its yellow-white freestone lent new dignity to the sandy windy hill of red houses like boxes, each with its regulation square lawn and television aerial. It was like a recently created title come to live among the decently snobbish chief clerks, car salesmen, and dress buyers. The building was handsome and slick, suggesting a kind of H. G. Wells Hellenism. There were wide high windows covering the lengthy facade, well-proportioned and decently spaced, and the airy portico evoked, with its slim columns topped with ram's-horn volutes, the leisured dialectics of a never-ending Platonic summer.

The staff and their wives, the governors, the dim important people who had to be invited, the parents, the friends of the school, old boys and girls, waited in their raincoats for the Director to arrive, take the symbolic key, and declare the school to be open. One staff wife was not present — Mrs Howarth. She, most providentially, had gone to visit

her mother in the north. The mother was ailing, or said she was. Howarth had insisted that his wife take a small bunch of flowers, purchased from Grantham's on High Street out of Gardner's gift of money, a token of a son-in-law's new-found affection. Howarth now stood next to Mrs Connor. Her husband, of course, had not been able to get mid-week leave.

`A credit to the town.'

`To the county.'

'A three-stream entry next year.'

`A pleasure to work in it.'

`Light.'

`Air.'

But Gallimard, the French assistant, kept saying:

froid,' his hands deep in an R.A.F. flying-jacket, the fur up to his ears, stamping his feet, *bougrement froids,* on the soaked flags.

Some of the staff carried their gowns and hoods in attaché-cases, others had them wrapped inadequately in brown paper. Lodge wore his hood in the manner intended by the medieval Arabs, hearing the rain needle down on the worn stuff, like so many tiny sewing-machines. Mrs Connor wore an austere raincoat, but her cyclamen lipstick made her look whorish in the frank March rainlight.

`Does he come home often?'

`Nearly every week-end.' She wrinkled her rather small grey eyes. 'Sometimes there's a party in the mess, so he stays. Sometimes I go there. Why do you ask?'

`I was just wondering, that's all. Why don't you go and live with him?'

`We both prefer it this way. We can't get tired of each other. It's always like a honeymoon when we're together.'

`You think marriage should be all champagne and fireworks?'

`Light and bubbles. Yes. I'm getting jolly wet.'

`If you get in front of me that will shelter you from the wind.'

`Hm ? Thank God, he's come. I hope he doesn't take his time about it.'

`What I was going to suggest,' said Howarth, 'for this evening ..

She wasn't listening. A car had screeched in. Scouts blew a bugle fanfare. There was the Director, getting out with his professional boyish smile, ready for handshakes, another, yet another. Woolton greeted distractedly, as though he had put milk to boil on a stove and couldn't remember where the stove was. On the touchline stood the two Mrs Wooltons, the younger querulous, the older nodding vigorously, as though the speeches had already started and she approved of what was being said. The Director took the shining key from simpering Alice, fumbling with it at the door. Smiles masked the faintest flutter of apprehension. Suppose it doesn't fit?

`This,' said Howarth, 'is too theatrical. Look up there.'

Above the easing rain a shining bow stretched, the colours neatly filed as on some garish cosmetic chart, arched and shameless, a covenant.

The Director murmured something and — all thanked God — the doors swung open with ease. As the crowd surged forward decorously, some, because of a random twisting of associations, felt a little ashamed. Opening time. Opening time, space, deity, number and weight, uncorking the holy bottle to the heirs of all the ages.

The laity mooed with admiration at the Latin motto gilded across the huge lintel of the assembly-hall doors, the too-new panelling, the composition floors, the shields embossed on the walls, the smell of polish, paint, and size.

AUDACITER ET SINCERE.

`But that's English, that word. Sincere.'

The learned suggested other mottoes to each other: *Ab ovo usque ad mala; Adscriptus glebx; Frangas, non flectes; Humani nil a me alienum Auto; Mihi cura futuri.* Why had there not been a competition for a new school motto? Why hadn't the old one been considered good enough to retain? They had always liked their little scabrous joke with the end of *Concordia Res Parvx Crescunt.* Old Woolton the spoilsport. Pismire grumbled as he always grumbled at menus, not knowing what he was eating.

Into the huge hall they trooped shyly, with due reverence, as if to plant the flag on new soil. No comfortable ghosts belly-laughed at them. Here the old students had never produced *Are You a Mason?, George and Margaret,* or *Quiet Week-end.* The smell of pregnant emptiness whispered: `Here is a new year. Cut out that nail-biting. Try to remember it's not "Between you and I". Watch that yokel diphthong in "say way hay day". Give your children less pocket-money, keep them away from the TV. Read a Shakespeare play once a month. Clean that tobacco-tar off your index finger. Bring your wife flowers. Complain about the bad bus service. See your dentist, if you still have any teeth, regularly.'

The staff and their wives shambled or marched stiffly down the aisle, between the rows of rational stackable chairs. Ennis played, on the new Bechstein, a kind of limping march of his own composition. The staff hoods gave them a certain transient rainbow dignity, proclaiming, in silk colours or dalmatian ermine, the nobility of the teacher's labour. Hoods from university, academy or gown-entitling three-guineas-a-year teachers' society. Resplendent at the tail came Dr Gardner in red. Red. Royal flame among the chalk-weary black. The audience muttered admiration and curiosity. Red. Why red? He's the boss. No, he's a doctor. Doctor? A doctor teaching? He's a big man, knows it all. A doctor, Emily

Well. Who would have thought? Red.

Howarth and Hilda Connor sat together on the draughty platform. They saw battens and spotlights above them like blind eyes. But their gaze, like the gaze of everyone else, always came back to Gardner, clothed in raiment as of ruby. 'Can't keep my eyes off him,' said Gay, in his Sunday P.T. man's blazer. 'Like a so-and-so traffic signal.' Dr Gardner sat in the front row, dignified, next to his youngish chic wife, awaiting the arrival of his peers, nay hardly his peers, not academically anyway, for not even the Director himself .. .

To a rustle of rising the jowled and grey and important entered, climbed up the stage-ramps, peered at names on chairs, crossed over, smiled, sorted themselves out. All the time Ennis played another of his compositions, a jaunty three-four tune which was not quite a waltz, not quite a mazurka or polonaise. It was meant to be a salutary solvent of aldermanic and mayoral hubris, but nobody seemed to be listening, no visible sense of self-importance was diminished in the slightest. Lord Vestige, chairman of the board of governors, took his middle seat puffily and with an old man's persecuted air. He drew out an old envelope and a pencil and at once began certain calculations, probably the Z s d of expected Festival-of-Britain-year visitors, at half a crown a time, to his castle. Ennis struck up again, this time a *nobilmente* brotherhood-of-man song sung by selected junior children. Mr Woolton recited one of his positivist prayers. Then came the Director of Education.

The Director of Education. Clappy clappy clappy clap clap clap. A chord, as for a trapeze performer, from Ennis.

`My Lord Chairman, Mr Mayor, ladies and gentlemen. A few weeks ago I was waiting for a connection at a country junction which, for the very good reason that I cannot remember its name, shall be nameless. I was cold and tired

and, despite a couple of curled-up sandwiches in the refreshment-room, hungry. Life seemed even more than usually depressing.' Everyone tittered, as though everyone knew that life was, of course, really nothing of the kind. Howarth moved a fraction closer to Hilda Connor.

`The rain fell and the train was late. I had nothing to read and nothing to look at. Did I say nothing? I did not mean quite that. One person — I should hesitate to call him a thing — alone redeemed that wearisome vigil from making me feel, shall I say, just a little suicidal. It was a British schoolboy.' Everybody shifted position, disappointed. They had expected a homicidal maniac, a sex killer, at least a drunkard. 'A British schoolboy. I knew he was British because of his voice, his remarks about homework, and his knowledge of railway engines.'

Howarth shifted closer again to Hilda Connor, his gowned sleeve touching hers. His elbow felt the solidity of her woman's arm. She moved it away, ever so slightly.

`He was alive, ruddy-cheeked, interested in everything — except perhaps his school-work — and, shall we admit it, just a little bit naughty. He poked at the pigeons in their travelling baskets, breathed up the nostrils of a young bull calf, examined the labels on the passengers' luggage. He tore from the wall a strip of a timetable and, on the arrival of, I take it, one of his classmates, began a jolly good game of chasing and hair-pulling.'

Next to Woolton, Woolton's wife could be seen beginning to whimper. Woolton's mother gave her a hard slap on the wrist.

`She — for his companion was a British schoolgirl — gave as good as she got, and the platform was soon alive with their noise and banter. A few crusty old people complained among themselves, talking of how British youth had gone to the dogs since their day. No manners, they said, no con-

sideration, young hooligans.' Several teachers nodded in agreement, unseen of the Director of Education. 'It was at the height of their grumbles that I felt I had to step in, have my five cents' worth, as our friends across the Atlantic say. I told them, rather than complain, they should rejoice at the vitality of modern youth. "Be grateful for that uninhibited joy of living," I told them, "that lack of fear, that honesty, that curiosity. They are not afraid of anything," I told them, "they are eager to play their part in the great adventure of living." '

Howarth breathed deeply, looking at her sidelong, simulating an incipient irrepressible desire. 'Your presence,' he meant himself to be indicating, 'is doing things to me.' But Hilda looked in front of her at the wagging head and mobile back of the speaker.

`Youth,' said the Director. 'It is to youth that we dedicate this glorious new building today. One of the provisions of the last Education Act was that the finest type of education should be made available for all the youth of the country, regardless of consideration of social rank, wealth or creed. All children have a right to the best that free education can give them. Secondary education in the past, as your Headmaster was just recently saying to me' — here he inclined slightly towards the red-robed Gardner, who seemed no whit embarrassed — 'was the privilege of a very few, those with money or luck, but all that is now being changed. Those of you who have ventured forth into the lovely playing-fields of this magnificent school will have seen that two buildings — to be equally magnificent — have already begun to rear themselves in the near distance. These are to house, when they are finished, the Secondary Modern and Secondary Technical Schools which will feed a wide area and which will, I am sure, prove equally with this a source of profound civic and regional pride.'

A little clapping broke out, and Howarth whispered: Will you come to the pictures? Afterwards?'

`Pardon?' She looked at him for a moment. The Director led into his peroration.

`This year is a year in which we celebrate British achievement. But we do not look solely to the past. We are truly and justifiably proud of what we have done in the field of education — its almost complete democratisation, the provision for all of the best that money can buy — but we must look ahead to an even greater egalitarianism. We must cease to laud the bookworm and the scientific genius above the good steady child, for it is the good steady child, with no outstanding abilities, who will build the world of tomorrow. We must prepare our children, our ordinary not very talented children, to play their part in the rough world of practical endeavour. Education is primarily for them. Education which, though threefold, shall nevertheless be a unity. Three in one, a chord of three notes which shall be the music of the spheres.' He smiled down at Ennis's open mouth. 'Today, in assisting at the ceremony of opening this beautiful new school, we pledge ourselves to an ideal, the ideal of equality, and at the same time we take an oath of allegiance to the Youth of Britain, in whose hands lie our Future, our Hopes, and the realisation of our unquenchable Ideals.'

Before the applause started, Woolton's wife laughed, a mirthless laugh which all except Woolton feigned not to have heard. Woolton shook. Under the clapping Ennis fingered lightly the trio of a Pomp and Circumstance march.

Votes of thanks followed. The Mayor, decked with his chain of office like a prize bull, said they had to definitely express their gratitude and that they had all to most certainly agree that the speaker done his job really good. Vote of thanks seconded, vote of thanks to the proposer of the vote of thanks. Vote of thanks to the proposer of the vote of

thanks seconded. At last the word-hoards seemed to swing open empty, but, unexpectedly, Lord Vestige stirred, blinked, rose. He spoke loudly and arrogantly, as to retainers.

`Couldn't follow a lot of that,' he said, 'any more than you could, I suppose. Intellectuals, eh? Supposed to be the backbone of the country, but I do believe they nearly lost us the war. Not this last war. First one. That *was* a war. I say this. I say: give your children what you can afford in the way of education, but don't let 'em get too big for their boots. What? Lot of nonsense about equality. Some born to rule, some to serve. Stands to reason. Only my opinion, of course, for what it's worth. What? Better sit down, I suppose. Said too much already. Suppose we're all goin' home now. Good day to you.' Woolton's wife roared with laughter. Ennis crashed into something loud. 'Tea,' called Gardner. 'Tea will now be served.' Woolton could be seen taking his wife off by way of the wings.

The wagons of tea, cakes, puff-paste canapés , buttered buns and sandwiches were wheeled in quickly. The audience was on its feet, buzzing. Scouts stacked the chairs, skidding them to the wall. The dignitaries on the stage began to descend to the auditorium. The staff started to do its duty, serving, smiling, saying 'Oh, Christ' out of mouth-corners.

Coming down the steps from the stagc, old Mrs Woolton slipped. She was surrounded by helpers at once. The Mayor could be seen bending over her, his chain of office keeping (as water its horizontal) its vertical level. `Me leg,' she kept saying. 'It's me leg. Too much polish on those stairs.' She could not walk but was not hard to carry to a chair against the wall. Gardner took charge. He loudly told his wife to bring the car round to the side entrance.

`The Woolton women,' said Howarth, `are much in the public eye. Poor old Woolton. I suppose all this is a bad omen.'

`There you go, you see,' said Hilda, 'full of Catholic superstition. Poor old thing. Perhaps I ought to sec what I can do.'

`She's getting plenty of attention,' said Howarth. 'Cigarette?' He offered Hilda his open packet of ten.

`Thanks, Chris.' She sucked at the flame, exhaled, showing off her white neck above the smart blue jumper. Howarth looked for Alice the ever-watchful, guardian of school morals. But, of course: she had followed Woolton and his laughing wife. He said:

`What a damned shame it is. Poor woman. I suppose it's the change.'

`Pardon?'

`The menopause. The female climacteric.'

She looked archly at him, his mention of the cessation of a period of biological usefulness carrying the overtones of its opposite. 'How do you know about these things?' Well, damn it, everybody knew, didn't they? Silly little ... But he said:

`You've nothing really to do afterwards, have you, Hilda?'

`Well . . . Why?' She gave him a curious glance of elated suspicious malice.

`Come for a meal or a drink or something Come to the pictures.' It was only four o'clock.

`Oh, Chris, I couldn't. What would people say?'

`Damn it, we're colleagues, aren't we? Why should people say anything?'

`You know what people are like. Besides, I'm not sure that I want to go out with you.' This was most promising. 'In any case, I've got a lot of marking. I'd better go home.'

All heads turned to see old Mrs Woolton carried out by Gardner. The red gown gave him the look of Santa Claus nursing a child. 'There they go, you see,' said Howarth. He spoke as though Gardner were taking old Mrs Woolton to the cinema and this were a pious example to be followed. `Come on, Hilda. Please. We can go to the pictures and then

have a couple of drinks and a meal. Dinner at the Dragon.' He rustled Gardner's gift in his pocket to show that his offer was viable. 'I've got to eat out, anyway. Veronica's gone to her mother's and Peter's having tea with a friend and there's nothing in the larder. Eat out with me.'

`Well.' She gave him a frank look. 'We'd better go out of town. To Charlbury, perhaps. We could do that, I suppose. I've got the car.'

`Yes, yes, let's do that. I'll go first. I'll meet you at the car park.'

As he left he heard the faint distant swung hammer of thunder approaching the county. Plenty of bad omens for poor old Woolson and his new magnificent hall of the gods. Pity.

TWO

One

MARCH rode on to a Saturday afternoon, dry and blustery. Howarth was returning from a visit to a minor public school of the region, whither he had had to escort his own school's first fifteen. He was very cold coming back, and in great need of rum, say, or a dollop of the kind of cheap rough brandy you can get in sailors' haunts in Marseilles. But France was far and brandy a name. He was jumpy, too, made so by the visions of boys with identical coxcombs and quick deferential nervous accents who had led him down cloistral corridors smelling of jam and changing-rooms. A guest in an alien staff-room, he had said the wrong thing The discussion had been beyond him, too academic altogether.

`If they could, perhaps, change the line-out rules. With a long one you could get a quick straight pass to the scrum-half. The Harlequins . .

`It's the wing forwards.' The big man with the clerical collar sucked an empty pipe pointing up like a small angelic trumpet, saying: 'Wait till the ball's out of the scrum. Then let them break, get with the number eight forwards ..

Um. It'd be harder for the three-quarter to break through.'

`A big hooker,' said a thin grey aquiline master, 'in a three-two-three pack. Get your five forwards on him, one shove, a big one, time it properly.'

`Perhaps Mr er here, our visitor, has some ideas. Unless, of course, he doesn't think that the game is in need of brightening up.'

`Get rid of four of the fifteen,' said Howarth promptly. `Get a rounder ball. Put some nets behind the goalposts ..

There was a brief silence. Some of them looked at the man in orders, as if waiting for him to start an exorcism ceremony. 'Tea, I think,' intoned this holy man. Then Howarth and his fifteen were speeded off the premises. Now, the hired bus having dropped him in his village, he almost ran to the cottage, hungry for a fire. In the front room there seemed to be a visitor. He entered it and found Veronica with her shoe off, a man trying to pull out a hurtful sprig with pincers. 'Can't do it,' he said. 'I could never be a dentist. Hullo, Howarth.'

It was Dr Leary, a grey mane over the youngish face, a slurred damp brogue from the meaty lips. He was sitting on the couch with Veronica before the cat and fire. Veronica was made up, her hair arranged in sleek Madonna style, her ankles and calves in smart nylon.

'One problem solved,' she said. 'Such good news, Chris.' Leary had given her a job? A legacy had come through? 'Charles is going to run us in to Mass every Sunday. I met him coming out of confession.'

'That's very kind of you, Leary,' said Howarth. 'I'm so glad.'

'Have some gin,' said the doctor. 'I brought a bottle. Get yourself a glass.' Howarth went obediently to the Welsh dresser in the kitchen-living-room. He thought, charitably: 'It is in the nature of a doctor's trade that he make himself at home. He could even order me now, if he wanted to, to take off my clothes.' And hast command of every part,' he hummed to himself. Glass in hand, he went to make water, the lavatory-bathroom being on the ground floor. Coming back, he heard over the loud flushing the end of a rattled-off anecdote. He heard and now saw their laughter. Rilke had something about a *lachelnde Agar'* somewhere, didn't he? But they were on a *gestillten Teppich,* quietened carpet. Why quietened? He puzzled over that adjective and then,

with a quietened carpet clearly in view, saw himself and Hilda on it. Not yet, of course. How exactly and where exactly could it ever be managed?

'. . . Now this shark, you see, has a lovely great belly on him, and t'other shark, as thin as a rake, you see, says to him: "What in the name of God did you do at all to get a lovely belly like that on you?" Well, now, t'other answers ..

Howarth missed the end which, from Veronica's laughter, seemed to be obscene. Ah, well, a doctor is like Shakespeare; he can get away with anything. It was different, of course, for a teacher, unless the teacher happened to be also a doctor. When, he wondered, was Dr Gardner going to strike?

He sat down in his armchair, and, brought into Leary's line of vision, was admitted by him into the sodality. 'And how are all the dear little brats?' asked Leary.

'Oh, they're loving it at the new place.'

'Are they now? I heard the drainage isn't too good there.'

'The whole thing's a bit specious. The panelling's thin ply. A few fingers have gone through already. Some slates have blown off. Still, it was a strong wind.'

'Some of old Woolton's borborygms? He's leaving, or so I heard.'

'He's always been leaving. Ever since he got the job.'

'No, this seems a stronger sort of rumour. Some people in the Council offices were telling me . .

'I shouldn't take any notice. You know, every term I've had the same gleeful question from one child or another: "Is it true that you're leaving, sir?" And, to my regret, I've always had to say no. People are, I suppose, good Heracliteans.'

'Good what?' Leary pounced as if Howarth, unauthorised, had used a recondite medical term.

`Heracliteans. You know, *Panta rhei.* They like to see things flowing.'

'Elm. Of course, you know there's been the usual fiddle.'

`What? Where? With whom?'

`The contract for the new building. A shoddy job. Plenty of back-handers for everybody, that's where the money goes. Still, so long as old Woolton's pleased.' Leary picked up Veronica's shoe again, trying once more to wrench out the sprig. 'Old Woolton's not much good,' he pronounced. 'It's always a chaos when I come to do medical check-ups.'

'He doesn't believe in original sin,' said Howarth. 'That's all that's the matter with him. But he's consistent about it, you know. He grimly clings to his belief that every child is a good child.'

Peter could be heard returning, banging again and again the back door with its ill-fitting catch. He came through to the front room, striding in to greet his elders, a growing boy with rugger togs under his arm. 'Hullo, Doctor,' he said shyly, with that deference due to the keeper of the body's secrets. His week-end is nicely filled up, thought Howarth, with complementary compulsories — the windy field, the stuffy church. Howarth asked dutifully:

Did you win?'

`We lost — fifteen nil. How did the First get on, Dad?'

`You know, Peter, I'm ashamed to say I've forgotten. I think they won, but I can't be sure.'

Leary laughed. Veronica asked: 'What time do you have to he there?'

`At Pocock's? Gosh, in half an hour.' Peter looked at his wrist-watch.

`You'd better get ready, then.'

Leary held out a half-crown, proffering it like a host. 'Buy yourself something. Preferably ice-cream. That's good and nourishing.'

`Thanks, Doctor, thanks very much.' It was as though he had, all his life, dreamed of some day being given a half-crown. 'He has much of his father in him,' thought Howarth with some bitterness. He also felt a fly-itch of jealousy. Veronica said:

`Now, isn't that kind of the doctor? Don't spend it all. Try to save some.'

Peter went, bubbling. 'You'll have some tea, Charles?' invited Veronica.

`Surgery at six. Just a cup. Don't trouble yourself unduly.'

When she had gone to the kitchen, Howarth settled for the resumption of sheer chat, resignedly, sinking lower in his chair. 'How,' he asked, 'is Mrs Woolton getting on?'

`Never mind about Mrs Woolton,' said Leary, 'whichever one you mean.' He got up, checked that the connecting door was shut, then sat down again, bending forward with a sort of urgency. The damp consonants grew dry and sharp.

`I don't,' he said, 'like this haemorrhage.'

Haemorrhage?' Howarth stared.

`Oh, bleeding, then. She says it hardly ever stops.'

'Oh. You mean Veronica?' He was disturbed.

`Who else, damn it? She tells me it's been going on for over a month. What brought it on again?'

Howarth thought. Peter born in 1938, Veronica's rough time with the birth. That had been in London, when he'd been working at the school in Willesden. Evacuation to South Wales with the coming of war and, of all things, a bomb in the rural area where the two of them lived, himself being overseas at the time. The bomb had brought on this thing. It had persisted till the end of the war and his homecoming. Intermittent till they settled in France .. .

`A woman's system,' said Leary sententiously, 'is a queer thing. Delicately balanced. Mind and body are intermixed, more so than in a man. The thing cleared up a bit when

you came home. She says that in France it disappeared completely. She was happy there, I take it, had some sense of security.'

`For a time, yes.' How much had Veronica told him?

`How happy have you been since?' And yet,' reflected Howarth, 'everything's his province.' He answered, somewhat humbly:

`We both worry a bit, you know. After all, an assistant master in a grammar school isn't exactly rolling in money. We don't get much excitement or change. And neither of us is getting any younger.'

`She's young enough,' said Leary bluntly. 'Why doesn't she confide in you any more? Why did all this business come as a surprise to you?' Leary offered a cigarette, as if to mitigate the pain of the probing instrument.

`Oh, we have difficulties. The usual three things — religion, money, sex.' Strange how Leary took charge of everything, knew the thickness of the walls even; now, as was foreseeable, having given both gin and money and promised free trips to Mass, made one take off the last shred. 'We seem to get on each other's nerves a bit. There's no catharsis Damn it,' he added loudly, `I'm only human . .

Leary quietened Howarth's raised voice with a conductor's hand. Then he looked at him, flicking cigarette-ash on to the sprawling cat, looking. 'Who was it who was in charge of her case? Bristow? Well, if Martin Bristow and the other man could do nothing, there's not much I can try. She says the thought of any more of those examinations makes her feel, well, she starts a mild hysteria at the memory of it. It may, of course, be psychosomatic. She needs peace of mind, perhaps a change.'

`What can I do? I'm trying for better jobs. As for a holiday, well . . . You see, I have to work during the holidays. It's just the way things are.'

`I'd really like her to come into the Crichton for observation. She says she won't, says it may pass off again. It may, it's true, but she's got to be helped. It's . . .' They heard the clink of cups, a tray bumping against the closed door. 'All right,' warned Leary. 'Say nothing'

Veronica came brightly in with tea, sandwiches, a few biscuits, a shop cake. 'You look very conspiratorial,' she said. She put the tray down on the piano-stool. 'Sugar, Charles?'

`Thank you, my dear, no. Just as it comes, please. I'll try one sandwich, one only.' He munched hungrily, looked at his watch, raised his thick grey-black eyebrows. 'I'd no idea it was that time,' he said. 'Must be off. I've one or two calls to make before surgery. No, no, no more.' He gulped the hot tea in quick big sips. He rose, clattering down the cup and saucer, and donned his herring-bone overcoat in clumsy, big-boned movements. Out of the left pocket peeped the rubber of his stethoscope, a leech for a leech, *hirudo medicinalis.* He stood in the narrow hallway. 'Good-bye, Howarth, look after yourself, Veronica, I'll be around,' he said in one valedictory breath. He slammed the door, as of his own house. His car started at once; it sang up the scale, plunging into the early evening. On the sideboard was the bottle of gin he had brought, his token or proxied leg in bed. No, that was cruel. Still, he would be around.

`Why,' asked Howarth, 'didn't you tell me?'

`Tell you what?' Her blue eyes questioned him over the tea-cup's rim.

`Leary told me. About this thing starting again. You never said a word.'

`Oh,' she said, 'I didn't see much point.' She took a small sugary biscuit.

`I thought it had all cleared up,' said Howarth. 'You *might* have told me.'

`It did clear up. It will clear up again.' The cat, aware of titbits, lifted up a questing paw, tapping Veronica's shin with its brown pad. 'My nylons ! Stop that. Here.' The cat sniffed the crumbs in her palm and began to lick. 'Pretty Sirikitticat,' she said. Howarth groaned. `Mr Bristow,' she said, 'was sure it would go for good when we got properly settled.'

`We're settled here, surely,' Howarth said, throwing out his words with as much conviction as he would throw out a hookless line. 'You're not really unhappy, are you, darling? You don't really worry?'

A faint film of woman's tears was not long in showing. 'Oh,' she said, 'you know how I feel about things. And then there's the question of Peter's future. Oh.' Her eyes were swimming. He went over to her and sat on the couch beside her, feeling Leary's fading warmth underneath him.

`Everything's going to be all right, dear. You just wait and see.'

Tea was abandoned. Tea, the most civilised, fragile, useless, hence most pathetic, meal of the day. The cake on the tray made him feel hopeless. She clutched her handkerchief to her nose; tears had blurred her mascara. 'I'm being silly,' she said. 'There's nothing wrong with me really. I mean, not compared with Mrs Woolton.'

`Which Mrs Woolton? Has Leary been committing a breach of medical etiquette?'

`Never. Never.' She was shocked.

'I meant, you know, has Leary been telling you about her, then?'

'I met your school secretary.' Oh, God, thought Howarth, there were rather too many of these chance meetings. Still, Alice obviously still knew nothing about that trip to Charlbury, the late afternoon in the cinema (a French film), the drinks and dinner afterwards, no funny business at all on

the homeward journey. 'She said,' said Veronica, 'that they've both got to go into hospital.'

'Both Mrs Wooltons? That's a bit comic.'

'I wouldn't say it was comic,' chid Veronica. 'Young Mrs Woolton, Woolton's wife that is, of course, has to go into hospital because of the way the change is affecting her. It's affecting her mind, or something.' She spoke with the lack of concern of a woman who was still many, many years off the grand climacteric. 'And Woolton's mother's just old. Apparently she had a nasty fall at the opening of the new school. You never told me a thing about that, did you? And then you go on at me for not telling you about . .

`I didn't think you'd be interested.'

`You don't think I'd be interested in anything. That's because you just find me not interesting.'

`That's not true, you know it's not.'

`Charles finds me interesting. Charles likes to talk to me.' She sat up straight, picking up her compact from the small side-table. 'He tries to help. He wants to take me out to dinner sometimes, just to cheer me up a bit.'

'Leary? He takes a lot for granted, doesn't he? Where do I fit into his scheme of things?'

'He knows you won't mind. You've got to apply for jobs most evenings, anyway. And we just can't afford to go out together.'

`Well.' Howarth stood up and, with his, hands in his pockets, looked down at her. And yet. If he could have the house to himself more often, invite Hilda when he reached that stage ... Kindly he asked: 'What is the precise relationship between you two?'

`Don't be silly,' she said. 'Don't be so unutterably stupid.' Howarth blushed. 'It's just friendship, that's all.' She looked up at her husband and said with some truculence: 'How dare you think of me like that. How *dare you.'*

`People will talk, you know,' said Howarth. 'You can't prevent that.'

`It's all so perfectly innocent,' she said. 'As long as my conscience is clear, why should I care about other people?'

Howarth suddenly felt curiously content. He sat down again and took her hand. His burden was, after all, being halved. He felt a kind of gratitude. Perhaps she wouldn't worry so much about things, looking forward to a dinner or theatre, dressing up, being called for in a car. Yet the old gramophone record hissed and squawked, a barely audible sound. 'What a mess it all is, really. How subtly the old values are being broken up.' He said: 'Make sure he gives you a good time.'

`Charles knows how to do things. And I don't suppose it will be often, anyway.'

`Well, in the circumstances, I shouldn't think he'd begrudge me a drop of his gin.' Howarth poured himself a glassful, adding tepid water from the jug on the tea-tray.

`Are we going out?'

`Yes. I'll get ready.'

They boarded the bus into town. The main streets were full of people cultivating gaiety. Outside the cinemas grim queues waited. Youths with uncontrollable laughs, pert gum-chewing girls whinnied and quipped in harsh flat tones. The town smelt of Saturday perfume, beat here and there with the steady crotchets of dance-drums. The football editions were sung around the bars, and in a side street the Salvation Army blew the grave harmonies of its jaunty hymns. One had to have a good time on Saturday night, even if it meant two hours of taciturn bitter in the best room, the wife placid over her stout, hands folded, in her tasteless best, watching the other customers. For Saturn, bringer of old age, presided, aloof and saturnine; week-end is a sad word, the Elizabethans called an orgasm a death.

In the Dragon Howarth and Veronica ordered bitter beer. The bar was already filling with provincial characters — the elderly retired major who could quote from the poems of D. H. Lawrence; the one-eyed homosexual farmer; the gaunt vicar who stood with the bellied burgesses, his nose like a piece of cuttlefish bone stuck between the wires of a budgerigar's cage. Also there was a shrunken journalist who was writing a long comic epic in heroic couplets on the town and its denizens. He came up to Howarth and his wife, his spectacles glinting in the bar's strip-lighting, saying: 'You're literary, I know you are. Read this.' Howarth and Veronica read:

> `The Dragon's mouth will consummate our search
> For pillars of the borough and the Church,
> Whose bar-side stance bespeaks their propping function.
> There stands the Vicar who, with extreme unction,
> To flesh and blood will transubstantiate
> The cups that Sunday abstinents donate.
> This generation, wiser than the luminous,
> Thus gains vicarious contact with the numinous.'

`Good, isn't it?' said the poet-journalist. 'Very, very good.'

Veronica said:

`There's no need to be so blasphemous, is there? Even though he is only Church of England, it's still blasphemy.' She spoke loudly. Howarth said:

Tor Christ's sake, turn it up.' The poet-journalist said, huffily:

`That's not the point, not the point at all. Blasphemy is neither here nor there and, in any case, it's not blasphemous.' The Vicar, hearing the word, turned with a vague look of professional interest. Howarth, embarrassed, said to Veronica:

`Why do you have to shoot your mouth off?'

`Because I can't stand blasphemy, that's why.'

`Come on,' said Howarth, 'into the other room.'

`I'm quite happy here.' So that was it. The first beer of the evening awakening Leary's afternoon gift of gin. Howarth steered her with firmness into the large smoke-room. It was crowded and, just inside the door, a man quacked:

'Decarbonisation's easy enough. H.T. leads from the sparking-plugs, dismantle the exhaust pipe. That's right, from the manifold. Undo the nuts on the rocker shaft. Steady, though. The valves are open, you see.'

`Look who's there,' said Veronica. Seated, Hilda Connor and her husband. She was smart in black fur, black skull-cap, carrying a handsome handbag as big as a folio. Her husband, whom Howarth had never met before, was recognisable as her husband from the major's crowns on his service dress, his Royal Engineers' insignia. He was tall, young, blond. Hilda waved, smiling.

`I'd rather not,' mumbled Howarth. 'I'd rather not intrude.' The growing noise of the smoky smoke-room seemed already separating off from the clacking mouths — a silent film on phonation with a zoo accompaniment. Crammed with people, but there was an empty chair next to Hilda. Veronica went over boldly. 'Oh, God,' thought Howarth, following.

`You know Michael, of course?'

`I haven't had the pleasure. My wife Veronica.'

Major Connor said: `No, no, I insist, on me.'

`Gin, please,' said Howarth. He had committed himself to a midnight of *Weltschmerz.*

The two women talked of clothes, becoming animated, sisters over the skin, while Howarth and Major Connor stood awkwardly, measuring each other, by the bar. Howarth's heart ached as he heard his wife's purely theoretical expositions of new fashion trends, Dior and

Fath, the Irishman Molyneux. She sometimes yearned, gazing at the sleek models in the Public Library copy of *Vogue,* for the smart upper-middle-class world which might have been hers — if, for instance, she had married Fitzmaurice, the chain grocer's son, undeniably Catholic, the family made rich when Irish labour had been cheap, fond of presenting saints' statues to St John's.

`I'm sorry,' he said. 'I missed that.'

`Hilda says you were in the army. You never thought of signing on?'

`No, I got a bit sick. I was interrogating German P.O.W.s, and the technique wore me down. I was almost becoming a German myself, ripe for a Stroheim monocle. You like the army?'

`Yes, I like it. I'm doing all right. Hilda and I aren't short of money, that's one thing. We can afford decent holidays. I'm saving up my leaves this year so we can do a month in Italy.'

`I envy you.'

`You could have signed on.'

`No. It was different in war-time. I take it you weren't in the war?'

`I just got the tail-end.'

`Yes.' Howarth saw himself dimly in the mirror at the end of the smoke-room, a familiar face mouthing wordlessly, hair receding, lines appearing. He heard the changing theme of the women's conversation, the two struck flints of 'holidays' and 'Italy' having taken fire.

`But you must have a holiday,' Hilda was saying. 'One so needs the complete change.'

`Money,' said Veronica.

`Can't you do a little yourself? You know, part-time teaching, secretarial work. It helps.'

`She has enough work in the house,' said Howarth. 'Be-

sides ...' He was going to mention her health, but Veronica's eyes warned him not to. In the presence of the fit, well-off, well-dressed, it would be like another confession of incompetence — vulgar, like showing one's worn shoe-soles.

`There are ways,' said Hilda briskly, 'of getting a holiday. Some of the children at school want to go on an Easter trip to Paris. If you get twenty-five children, two adults can go free. You and Veronica could have a week in Paris for nothing. You'd only need pocket-money.'

`Why, you didn't tell me about that?' Veronica turned on Howarth as though he had withheld the fact that he'd committed bigamy. 'Oh, do you think it could be arranged? Oh, it would make such a difference. To see Paris again.' She looked up, like the Soul's Awakening, as if awaiting an orchestral cue for an American—Jewish song about Paris in the spring. The very idea of visiting Paris again had flushed her cheeks and made her look younger. Howarth thought about it. Yes. Pernod. He said:

`I don't see why not. I'll get down to it on Monday.'

And now past holidays were discussed — towns, mountains, lakes, rivers and little cafes shuffled into the talk like an emptied cellophane bag of foreign stamps.

`But how about Peter?' Veronica suddenly remembered, troubled.

`He can stay with your mother for a week. He likes it up there.'

`It wouldn't cost all that much to take him with us.' Howarth thought with sublime selfishness of how much Pernod that cost, however comparatively trifling, would mean. He said:

`Peter's seen Paris. Besides, the water doesn't agree with him.'

`It doesn't agree with anybody. Oh, all right then. Peter can have a week up north.'

`Good.' The others now began discussing foreign films, playing a sort of card game with dealt French titles, praising with the extravagant xenomania of the dilettante the foreign because it was foreign. Hilda said:

`That one we saw in Charlbury,' looking up at Howarth. `What was it called?'

Howarth felt a start of panic. Does she think that I told Veronica, all friends together, the gay suburban swop of spouses? She must, then, have told her husband, laughing with him at the disappointment of his hand, arm, seeking contact and response in the cosy dark. Major Connor stood, a little bored, swilling the gin round in his glass and examining closely the colourless meniscus.

Veronica opened her mouth, then closed it again. Howarth came in, quickly and gaily. 'I told you, darling. Hilda and I went to the pictures. It was after the opening ceremony. Surely you remember my mentioning it?'

`I don't remember.'

`Oh, oh,' went Hilda. 'Have I said something I shouldn't?' The husband gave a short laugh, aware of embarrassment in the company.

`The bus,' suddenly said Veronica. 'It's nearly half-past.'

`We can run you back,' offered Major Connor. 'You needn't go yet, need you?'

`No, thank you, we'll get the bus. Peter will be home now, and he won't go to bed till he's made to. Early communion for him tomorrow. And for me.' She was silent, as though she had just unveiled the lost soul of her husband: no early-communion-goer, a taker of women not his wife to the cinema. 'Come on, Chris,' she said.

As they went, Howarth saw the Major take the vacated seat, saw smiles and hand-holding. He walked into the night air as to the executioner's block. His words of explanation rebounded from her silence all the way home. And then

he said to himself: 'Oh, to hell.' But both of them put on parents' masks of ease and content for Peter's benefit. He was sitting up with the remains of his supper (shop cake and a glass of milk) and holding a book on British birds, presumably borowed from Pocock. To bed,' said his mother kindly. Peter said:

`When birds sing, Dad, is it meant to be *really* a kind of music?'

`Well,' said Howarth cautiously, 'it's a kind of self-expression, I suppose. But human music's meaningless, isn't it? Bird song always means something. It means things like "Come here, I'm waiting for you", or "I've just had a damn good feed of worms", or it means sexual desire.'

To bed, Peter, at once,' said Veronica.

`But I'm interested,' said Peter. Veronica gave her husband a look of great hatred, then seemed to remember that hate was a sin and that she couldn't go to communion tomorrow if she were not in a state of grace, so she switched to a look of suffering instead. Then her face screwed for tears and she dashed upstairs to their bedroom.

`Your mother's not very well,' said Howarth.

`Oh !' said Peter. 'See, there are some jolly good pictures in this book.'

`You'd better go to bed,' said his father. 'You've got to get up early in the morning.'

`I wish I didn't have to, Dad,' said Peter. 'Why don't you come too?'

`I think,' said Howarth, 'I probably will.'

`To communion?'

`Oh no,' said Howarth, shocked, 'I can't do that. Too many sins on my soul. I'd have to go to confession.'

`What kind of sins?' said Peter. 'The seven deadly ones?'

`Not gluttony,' said Howarth. 'At least, I don't think so. Not sloth either. But all the others, I think.'

`Lust?' What boyish intuition made him pick that one?

`I think you'd better go to bed.'

In bed, Howarth lay for a time thinking. His wife feigned sleep, unwilling to have it out with him, unwilling to risk anger and thus fall out of a state of grace. A passing Saturday-night car, full of revellers, threw brief light on to the film star picture of the Saviour, who wore a flaming heart like a blazer badge. Leary would take them to mass, bring them back, he could spend a quiet Sunday on the *Duino Elegies,* Veronica pleased that he should seem to be returning to the Church of his fathers. He watched, down the long tunnel of night and history, his Elizabethan ancestor Peter Howarth, a Lancashire gentleman, pin a copy of the Pope's bull of excommunication of the Queen, to the door of the local church. He had been hanged, his lands forfeited, speaking courteous words before the final jerk and the butcher's knife In the belled starred night the three-quarters struck. The cat Sirikit, lying between them like a sword, snored gently. A stolen church.

The soaring Norman pile raised its voice in the speaking of the hour, over the sleeping village where Saturday night bed ceremonies vibrated through the dark. 'Bed,' said the Italians, 'is the poor man's opera.' Howarth chuckled at that for a time.

Two

WOOLTON did his rounds of the School, the new square modern school which smelled of polish and central heating. He walked stealthily about this mill or hive, seeing through glass walls the gesturing teachers and the raised arms — 'Sir, sir, ask me, sir' — of the compliant pupils. There was so much to be said for environment. The children were desked in big glass cubes, glass that promised the sun, and their young brains breathed aseptic air.

Meanwhile Dr Gardner sat in his study—his right and due as Head of the Modern Languages Department — and questioned a young girl. A leatherette diary lay open on his desk, and his bland manner and moist smile somehow seemed to squeeze it dry as a text-book. Linda sat on one of the skeletal easily-stacked chairs, listening, wondering and fearing.

'I came across this by sheer accident, my dear, and was very interested. No, no, there's no need for you to feel embarrassed. This is not exceptional, not at all exceptional. I know you'd like to have it back, and so you shall, but you know that the Ministry of Education gives all teachers the right to examine personal documents of this kind, for the good of the pupils, you know, to help us to understand them better.' He smiled at her with a kind of batrachian kindness, and she tried, as though against the massed sucking of lemons, to answer the smile.

'Now,' said Gardner, let's talk about these things that took place in the Headmaster's office. It's nice to *see* that you like your Headmaster so much.' This, he thought, might

sound sarcastic to a brighter child. She was not very bright, he could see that: a thin but shapely little thing, with very pale hair and big eyes round with appeal.

'Please, sir,' she said, 'could I have it back now, please, sir? I didn't mean anything by it, honest, sir. I won't do it again, sir.'

But you didn't do anything wrong, Linda' He continued to smile, wet and warm, taking things slowly and gently. 'You didn't do anything at all, did you?'

'No, sir. I mean, sir, I shouldn't have wrote it, sir, I know that, sir, but it's my diary, you see, sir, it's personal like.' The girl saw looming up in the fog of her young mind the bulky forms of buses with strange shapes and numbers. 'What I mean is, sir, that nobody should have taken it, sir. It's private. Please give it back, sir.' She returned to the simple solution. Everything would be all right if she could get it back and burn it: the nights when she made the entries themselves would miraculously disappear. Please, sir.'

'But,' said Gardner, with a puzzled frown, 'when a person lets a diary out of his or her possession, Linda, it ceases to be private, it becomes public property.' He appraised the faint blue skin under her eyes, sign of worry. 'Surely you know that? Many diaries have been published. Some are famous — Pepys, Evelyn, oh, lots of them.'

`But,' said Linda, 'people shouldn't read it, they've no right 1'

'If you don't want people to read your diary, Linda, you shouldn't put temptation in their way. You should have kept it safe, under lock and key.'

'But I couldn't, sir. There was no place ... There was only my desk and my satchel.'

'Well, then, in that case,' said Gardner, 'you should never have started to keep an *intimate* diary.' She knew the word

`intimate'. She had heard of intimacy taking place. 'You see,' said Dr Gardner, 'you wouldn't dream of keeping a fierce dog if you didn't have a chain for him, would you? And a rabbit needs a rabbit-hutch. Similarly, a diary needs a really *safe* hiding-place.' She was silent, her mouth half open, her eyes begging him . . . Gardner thought: 'End of first phase.'

Now, my dear, to return to these things that happened in the Headmaster's office . .

`Nothing happened, sir. Honestly, sir. He never did anything, sir.'

'What do you mean?' Gardner made himself look slow and puzzled. 'Do you mean this is nothing but lies?' He slammed out the last word, letting it leap high and quickly in the question tune. 'Lies?'

`It's just what I imagined, sir, like. It wasn't real, sir. I just thought of it like writing a story, sir. It didn't happen, honestly it didn't.' She was, Gardner was interested to notice, literally wringing her hands. He got up, sighed, and put a hand comfortably on her shoulder, saying:

`There there, my dear, keep calm now. I'm only trying to help.' He walked slowly to the radiator by the window. Sets of French and German primers and text-books filled the wall behind Linda, their idiotically repeated titles squawking down, spine after spine, at her bent back. The harsh March light flowed in from the high window, taking colour and shadow from her face.

`So,' said Gardner, turning, 'the whole of your diary's just pure fiction, is it? Nothing in it is true, eh? All this about going to dances and shopping on Saturday mornings — that's all made up, is it?'

`No, sir,' she said, 'that's true. It's only the other bits that aren't.'

'So you just made up a little day-dream about visits to

the Headmaster, is that it? A day-dream in instalments, just like a serial.'

This last was not a question. She said nothing.

Suddenly he launched his thunderbolt voice. 'I don't believe it, Linda! A young girl like you imagining things like that with a man old enough to be your grandfather.' Not quite that, he qualified to himself, but went on: 'If it had been young Lowther or the Captain of the School, or one of the younger masters. But with Mr Woolton . Well It was Electra, of course, he thought vaguely, something like that classical bitch Electra. Woolton as dad-surrogate or something.

She still said nothing. Gardner said: `So, then, my poor unhappy Linda, you still maintain that it isn't true? That it's all made up, all lies?'

'Not lies, sir,' she said, with surprising acuteness. 'It's a sort of story, sir, and a story doesn't have to be lies.'

Gardner shook his head. 'If,' he said, 'you had made up these fantasies about a fictitious person, then you would have had something like a story, a genuine — if improper — work of the imagination. But you have introduced, deliberately and quite unmistakably, someone who actually exists — two people who actually exist. It's far, far worse, of course, than if these events had really taken place. Don't you see that? You've committed lie after lie to paper. You've published these lies — that means, in law, that you've allowed other people to see them. In other words, my poor Linda, you're guilty of a libel. A libel. A libel is the publication **of** lies intended to harm a person. Well, Linda,' he said, with a quiet show of being shocked, 'fancy a nice young girl like you being guilty of libel.'

`I didn't mean to do him any harm, sir,' said the child, much agitated. 'Honest, sir.'

`How do we know?' said Gardner. 'How can that be

proved? I should hate to be in your shoes, my poor child. There it is, anyway — harmful lies about your headmaster. Now we must think about what we can do,' he said, nodding up at the drab battalions of harmless classics and chatty primers, then out at the suburban washing. 'What we can do to save you.'

`Burn it, sir,' pleaded Linda. 'Please.' She writhed on her chair, trying desperately to connect her own innocent scribbling with these vast yawning moral consequences.

`If,' said Gardner, 'you insisted that these things were true. If you persisted in saying that what you recorded in your diary actually happened, then, I think, you would be safe. No court of law could touch you if you said it was the truth. And, of course, it could be established circumstantially that it *is* the truth.'

'But it *isn't* the truth, sir,' said Linda. She faced new terrifying fields of ethics, the ghastly sanctions of the adult world. 'It never happened, sir,' she cried.

Gardner sat down, sighing like an old man. 'How can we know,' he said, 'what happened and what didn't happen? Our memories are so fallible. The only things that we can definitely say happened, are either those that a great number of people witnessed, or those that we have recorded: recorded in words, in pictures, on magnetic tape, on shellac. You, Linda, have recorded something in words. As far as you're concerned, as far as everybody's concerned, these things actually happened. Of course,' he said, 'it's most unlikely that you'll ever be called on to say that. This is a story you may never have to tell. But, if you yourself are not to be blamed, remember, remember, that you must stand by what you've written here. And I, of course, will always back you up.' He gave her the full damp radiance of his smile. `Remember that, Linda dear. I'm very much your friend.'

`Yes, sir.'

Meanwhile, Woolton continued his walk round the school. He noted, with the sort of pain a child feels when a new toy is scratched or dented, the abrasions on the panelling, fingermarks on the paint, and ink spilt on the corridor floor. One of the panes of glass on a class-room door had been broken, removed, and not yet replaced. From within the room came the voice of Howarth, trying to teach a German diphthong:

`Ah-ee,' he was repeating, slowly, distinctly, anatomising the double sound. `Ah-ee. Now you say it, all together.'

`Aw-ee.'

`No, no. Ah-ee.'

`Aw-ee.'

Woolton saw in the neighbour room Begbie seated fatly at the desk, reading, not teaching. The children were drawing, not maps, however, and giggling across the desk aisles to each other. Begbie did not seem to care. One snouted lout in the corner — none other than Gilpin — was reading what looked like the grey paper and faint type of pornography. Woolton wondered again how far a liberal headmaster could go. He wondered more when he saw Turton's happy class. The children seemed to be acting a play and Turton seemed to have been cast as a beast of burden — mule, horse, elephant — for he was lolloping about the room with a child astride him, a few children goading him with kicks, the rest in high laughter. Turton cried: No, not like that, you little beast! Come on, now, back to your places!' But the play continued. Woolton saw a rather sober French lesson proceeding, stick-like Miss Rivers intoning a paradigm above very slight noise. In Fenton's massive art-room the children, drenched in north light, dabbled with paint. Free expression, but motor rather than visual. As Woolton passed on, he saw a girl's face arrested in the surprised mask of one who is splashed with greyish water.

Going by Gardner's study, Dr Gardner's study, he was

aware of a door opening and a girl emerging. He recognised the girl and smiled kindly at her. She looked, open-mouthed, and ran. His spirits soured. Why was he not liked? He saw the quick knock knees of the girl as she turned the corner and disappeared. He walked towards his office, thinking of yesterday's staff meeting, the rather brutal opposition to his suggestions for a new marking system, a smile of something like conspiracy lit by Gardner and beaconed to Begbie, Yews, Beyte, and one or two others, when quartiles had been mentioned. His proposed reforms seemed reasonable, even definitely original. The new library, where the meeting had been held, had lightened with the rare strengthening sun, the spines of the many books flushed with warmth, while the wrangling went on. It was, of course, inevitable that Gardner should, in his urbane, greased way, become obstructive: that had started when he had failed to get the post of Headmaster. But this division into camps had not been foreseeable — two camps: one for Gardner, the other not for anyone, being too cold and colourless for loyalty. Why didn't the man go? He had the highest qualifications, he was efficient, he was even popular. Yet he stayed on, smiling, plausible, illiberal, a disciplinarian when he wanted to be, a scarlet-robed doctor, a man with money of his own, a damned nuisance.

He walked to his office — an office which did not look substantially different from his old one, except that it was now on the right, not the left, of the assembly hall: he recognised that he had not changed with the change of environment — he walked to his office as the bells that ended morning school sang over, over, let God be half thanked, the day is half over. He had to admit to himself that his dream of being alone, living without a woman in the house, *was* not quite so pleasant in fulfilment as he had expected. Cooking, of course, was neither here nor there: he could cook well

enough for himself. What he had not had the wit to expect was the aching of the womanless vacuum to be filled with woman, and that woman, of course, none other than Alice. He could not very well bar the door, after all. And every evening he had to visit the hospital, first to see his wife, then his mother. Why was it that what singly would invite nothing but sympathy provoked, when doubled, nothing but laughter? One of the women, when temporarily out of the grip of sedation, raved at him; the other rambled all the time — she had, they said, not long to go now; she was very old, when all was said and done. But these two women could be left with the ringing of the bell; Alice could not be eluded so easily. He groaned his way to his desk. There, laid out neatly on a tray, was a portion of school lunch. On that same tray, in a tiny vase, was a brace of daffodils. Groaning, he tried to eat.

Staff and children also went for food. Some were off, yelling, ringing bicycle-bells, home. The rest made for the fine new unappetising dining-hall. Accidie, the scholar's disease, was being exorcised by the smell of greens and the smoke of gravy. Staff gowns hung like bats; yale and yammer filled the corridors where the children fought, crushed, pushed, their bellies rolling for food. There were two sittings, with a master and mistress to supervise each. Howarth said to Fenton:

'Are you hungry?' He must be careful, very careful.

'Not particularly,' said Fenton. 'Why?'

`Oh, because if you wanted to eat now I'd be quite pre. **pared** to swop with you.'

`Well,' said Fenton, 'as a matter of fact . . . That is to say, why would you want to?'

Because . . .' (Because Hilda Connor *is* on second dinner duty and the two of us would be able to be, quite legitimately, alone at the staff table.) 'Because I arranged a meet-

ing with some of the kids who are interested in going on a trip to France, and most of them seem to be **on** the second sitting.'

`Why didn't you say so?' said Fenton. (Because that lucky inspiration only came just then; **I** must plan more, really I must, thought Howarth.) And Fenton flew off to say grace.

Dim visions of steam and shining cauldrons, chatter and knife-twanging, salt-throwing and water-dabbling after Fenton's perfunctory monotoning. Queues in file to the serving-hatches; solid clouds of scooped potato in a sky of stew-sauce. The staff ate at two special tables, shouting over the children's din — fixtures, dunces, discipline .. .

Today coffee was served in the women's staff-room. The men sat on chair-arms, window-ledges, tables, or stood about, sipping the weak over-milky brew.

`. . . He won't grant a penny more for rugger,' complained Keyte. 'Doesn't seem to know the game exists. I told him, **I** said I'm not going to pay for new jerseys out of my own pocket. But he'll talk for hours about starting a Classical Society.'

`Soon put paid to that, anyhow,' said Yews. 'He lives in the past, that's his trouble.'

`He's not well,' said Gardner. 'And no wonder, poor devil.

Middle-aged Miss Granville, smart in smoky-blue tweed, knitted something warm and amorphous. Miss Ankers, in P.T. shorts, puffed out smoke like a man, rubbing her mannish knees. Mrs Wilson and Miss Griggs sat demure, queenlily, with poised cups.

'One feels sorry for him,' said Gardner, his glasses catching the light, becoming for a moment an eyeless monster. But the fact remains that there's a school to be run, and a sick man obviously can't run it.' Lodge went on reading, over loud sips of coffee, a book he had found in one of the class-rooms: *Treasure Island.* The title had been vaguely familiar to him for some years, but he had never before actually handled a copy. He was lost in its world of bellying sails and yo-ho-ho's, enchanted by his vision of the wealth of the humanities. It isn't,' said Gardner, 'merely a question of his not being able to organise. There's something far worse.' He paused, waiting for the demure women's eyes to show mouse interest in the far worse. 'You see, there's the children. They have to be protected, they've got to be kept insulated from the abnormal, the diseased. Please don't think I'm trying to imply that Woolton's diseased. He's not, but I think he's ripe for flying off the handle. That business of the girl in his study, for instance. Sorry,' he said hurriedly. 'Forgive me, ladies, I just didn't think. There may be nothing in it, after all.'

The predatory eyes of the women widened. Miss Granville said: 'Miss Fry assured us that there was no truth in it, no truth at all. He was, she said, merely being fatherly.' Miss Fry was not there; she lunched at her digs.

`Fatherly, eh?' Gardner looked down on the seated women **who** waited eagerly for more. 'It doesn't seem to me that he was very fatherly with this fourth-form girl. He forgot himself, it seems. Oh, I won't say how **I** know. How far he forgot himself is not very clear at the moment. Perhaps not very much. But you see what **I** mean.'

But, really . .

'No !'

'Well?

A sort of voluptuous indignation stirred among the women. They looked forward to a happy half-hour of conjecture when the men had returned to their own staff-room.

Meanwhile, the second sitting having started, Howarth and Hilda Connor sat alone at their table in the dining-hall, while noise and horse-play went on unheeded. Hilda's left hand was raising a forkful of dark wet potato to her

cyclamen lips. 'If I don't do it now,' thought Howarth, 'I'll never.' The whole thing was fantastic—the many, many children, their spiritual father and mother in sacerdotal robes, she saying: . . Absolute freedom for both.'

`Hilda.' He put down his knife and fork, clasped his hands, elbows on the table. He got it all out in a rush. 'I've been wanting for so long to tell you, but I haven't had the courage. To tell you how I feel about you. You must know, you can't help knowing. Ever since you came I've felt this thing, tried to shrug it off, knowing what a hell of a mess it all is, both of us married, working at the same school. But when it comes, one can't do a thing about it. I mean, it's real, I've analysed it too much to doubt it, I do love you, Hilda, I really do.' She said nothing, but she had stopped eating, her hands under the table. The children, free from reproof, played games while waiting for their pudding: they emptied the salt-cellars into each other's hair, gargled with the water and spat it hack into the jug, aped the gestures of professional knife-throwers, made horrid noises with their lolled-out tongues, passed on kidney punches, edged the weaker ones off the benches.

`You see,' said Howarth, 'I've said it now, and I'm glad I've said it, even if you slap my face, walk out, report me to the Head.' But she clearly proposed to do none of those things, at least not yet. 'Love,' said Howarth, as if to tell her what he had been talking about.

`I did think,' she said at length, slowly. 'I was hoping you'd say nothing. You're making things so ditult. It's just not possible,' she said, looking at him with just e faintest smirk of gratified vanity. 'You know that, Chris. rou should never have said anything Oh, dear, dear. Look, those children are making a dickens of a row. We must go and stop them.'

`I love you,' said Howarth. `o hell with the children. I love you.'

Rich had already eaten his packet lunch at break. He was giving himself a free school dinner, confident that nobody would notice or, if notice, care. Waiting with the rest for pudding, he looked with interest at the urgent face of Howarth. He said to Peter, at the other end of the bench: `Your dad's getting soppy. See, he's in lerv. Nice bit of stuff she is, too.' He leered, making a rapid elbow-bend ithyphallic gesture.

`That's silly,' said Peter. Nevertheless, the table antics continued, unreproved. Mimms belched. A little girl said: `You horrid thing.' At the far end of the hall a bench fell over with a show of black stockings and a few screams and giggles. Gilpin, ugliest boy in the school, was at work there.

`And yet,' said Hilda, whose back was to all this, 'if I said: "Let's run away together", if I said that, you'd back out like a shot.'

`Oh no, I wouldn't,' said Howarth, feeling a conventional twinge of fear that perhaps his avowals were being taken too seriously. 'I love you. If you were free, I'd marry you.'

`Nice and safe behind your Catholic marriage.' She smiled with a small show of malice. 'You couldn't marry me, even if you wanted to. What would Veronica say about all this?'

`I've got past caring about what Veronica thinks or says,' he mumbled. 'It's never really been a marriage. You,' he said, 'stand for so much that's clean and free and uninhibited. A modern world. She doesn't understand that sort of world.' He made, under his smooth agitated surface, faces of loathing at himself. Soon, he knew, he would be dressing up this raw desire in the songs of the troubadours, perhaps making a philosophy out of an itch for warm flesh and the tang of tousled hair. 'When I go back to her every day I'm right in the middle of it again: the Agnus Dei on the wall and the crude crucifix and the whole bloody butcher's shop.

You're *clean,'* he almost shouted. Some of the children heard and looked shocked.

Clean was what many of the children now were not. Some were spooning up sago pudding; others were still collecting it at the hatch. They greeted it less as a food than as a deliciously nauseating toy, a new weapon in the sex war being conducted at the remoter tables. It was streaked on the benches, clung to clothes like frog spawn, was dribbled out of mouth corners and applied to heads like chrism. It was viscous, disgusting, ubiquitous.

'Oh, Chris, all this is impossible,' said Hilda. 'You don't know what you're saying. We couldn't meet, not in a town like this. The scandal would be everything. You might lose your job . .

.. Lose his job,' said Miss Ankers in the ladies' staff-room. 'And horse-whipped, too, for good measure.' The women had relaxed into eager chatter. Silk and woollen knees were thrust towards the fire (their erogenous current no longer able to flow, the men having gone) and safety-pins were adjusted on broken suspender-belts or other garments. Suddenly it was realised that Lodge was still there, half hidden in the corner. He was whisked back by loud ladies' coughs from his innocent world of mutiny and treachery, realising then that he was alone, Hercules among women. He shambled off, grunting. Then gossip could really begin.

'I can never understand men,' said Miss Granville, who taught History and had written her Master's thesis on the *mceurs* of the Restoration Court. 'I often see their eyes, burning, you know, not at me, of course.' Her brief pause went unfilled. 'At these young girls. Oh, I know they're pretty and all that in a jejune sort of way, some of them. I mean, I can understand their drinking and betting and so on, but this obsession with young female bodies is just rather pathetic.'

'Lust,' said Miss Rivers. 'We all know about Lust. I have seen Lust on the Continent. Lust is all very well for some people,' she said, 'but for a headmaster it is, shall one say, rather shameful. I'm really quite bewildered. I feel quite polluted. To think of an educated man, with so many responsibilities and, one had thought, so many academic and social interests ..

'I'd give him social interests,' said Miss Ankers.

. . Not able to keep his hands off young girls. Well. I go quite cold at the thought.'

'It may not be true, of course,' said Miss Griggs. She was a pleasant pink girl with pink-framed glasses, devoted to Virgil, now poising her ink-pencil over a Latin exercise. 'It may be one of Dr Gardner's fancies. I mean, there's no proof of anything. Men are such terrible scandalmongers'

'It seems definite enough,' said Miss Ankers. 'I never quite believed what young Fry said when she came out of his office. She was a bit too shaken for my liking. Trembling like an aspen. In my view, something ought to be done.'

`There may be a terrible row,' said Mrs Wilson. 'There was that case in the Sunday papers, you may remember. The Head who kissed the girls as a reward for good work.' She clicked a gesture of shock.

'We ought to be writing a letter or round robin or something,' said Miss Ankers. 'We ought to be letting the School Governors know that we've no confidence. The discipline is disgraceful, quite apart from this business.'

'It's all tied up, of course,' said Miss Rivers. 'Unbridled lust,' she added, with relish.

'The point is,' persisted Miss Ankers, 'would you all sign?'

'Sign what?'

`A letter saying that we all view with great concern .. . You know the sort of thing. I could write it myself if nobody else wanted to. I do, after all, do some Junior English.'

In the dining-hall two plates of sago pudding lay untouched, cooling fast. 'So that's how it is,' said Howarth. He added: 'My dear, I'm old enough to know the difference between mere physical desire and the real thing. All I ask is . . All he wanted to ask for was what he couldn't very well ask for. Not yet. Ever? It was a wearisome business.

`The children are breaking everything up,' said Hilda. 'We must . . . You'd better do something. I've got to go and do the rounds of the cloakrooms and what-not. *There,'* she said, as the noise of shivering glass cracked smart from the far end of the dining-hall, temporarily hushing the children's gabble. 'That's what talking about love does for you.' And she went off, her gown swinging, thick hair tossing, not looking back. Howarth marched down the dining-hall to the broken window. The wind blew through violently. Gilpin, a dream of ugliness, cowered.

`You'll have to pay for that,' said Howarth.

`Ah shouldn't av bin let do it,' said Gilpin, with that always unexpected boy's acuteness which could sometimes frighten. `Ah couldn't 'elp meself.' Howarth sighed. He marched back to the middle of the dining-hall and commanded silence. He shouted:

`Stand!' They stood, knocking benches over in a *feu de joie.* He began to say grace, the alien Protestant grace he had learned only comparatively recently. But he got it Freudianly wrong.

`For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful.'

The children, to whom it was all one, amened with vigour.

Three

1

WOLTON's eyes swam again with a sort of giddiness as he saw the letter distort and collapse under the fingers that crumpled it. He tried to clear the obscene image from his mind, but it remained. It was a caricature of himself — hair, nose and gown — reaching out with big hands for a figure that was a mere ideograph of a girl. The typewritten note said: 'You not only cannot do the job, but you are taking advantage of your position. I know what goes on. Clear out and hand the school over to somebody who can control both it and himself.' Neat black letters on a sheet of good thick paper. Unsigned. He made himself look at the envelope. His name and the school address, written in the careful unformed hand of a child. A local postmark. `Action,' he thought, 'I must take action.' He found vague memories of detective stories colliding with his nausea. The police would be able to identify the typewriter, the paper and the scrawl. Meanwhile suspects would have to be sought, and there was no tangible evidence. The sewer stuff would be publicised in the local press; perhaps at last justice would be done and nothing solved.

For if he had made enemies, then he had failed. All he wanted was a happy school, a contented staff — loyal, too— and the liberal philosophy vindicated. He crushed the drawing and the letter and the envelope together, put this crisp ball of filth into „his heavy glass ash-tray, and then felt for his matches.

And he had thought that that was all over. Some deranged brain had sent its steadily thickening abuse to the other school, and he had lately been able to see the school and the abuse as both part of an evil past — dirt, decay, rot, surrounded by the corrupt life of the town. The move to the airy suburb and the clean new building had been like a disinfestation, a bath, rose-petal skin, then to be blessed with fresh linen.

There was nothing that could be done. The cunning evil mind, mad mind, made sure he would see every leprous word and, as it were, feel the salt on the herpes, by contriving so harmless and undistinctive a cover. An unformed hand, like so many that he *saw,* as, humming perhaps, he tare open the wrapper with his long fingers.

And supposing it was Gardner? It could not be Gardner. Gardner was a power-lover, but it was the perverse thrill of open opposition that he loved. He was assertive, not sly and hidden. Besides, Gardner was sane, a scholar of sorts, a man in no wise frustrated, a man to whom this meanness of the scurrilous drawing and abusive note could bring no satisfaction.

Who, who, who? And what was this new theme of corruption? Could it be a child? No. Somebody insane. Somebody adult enough to be insane. The polished shining era ahead was already sullied. Freewill faltered and he saw a predetermined future stretching through the long building, round and round the encircling corridor. It had, he supposed, to come to this stage: the taunt of corruption of the young. Though there was no real limit to the gloating mirages the deranged mind could conjure. It would be pederasty next. It would be orgies. He had to pull himself together, he had better not think.

In his medicine-chest in the private wash-room was a small bottle of brandy. He poured himself out a measure

into a water-glass and then sat in one of the arm-chairs for visitors, sipping it, feeling the return of warmth and control.

Alice came in, a neat sheaf of forms and lists in her hand. She looked automatically towards the big desk, with its bust of Plato, its flowers, its telephone, then turned to see him there, doing no work ('So,' he thought, 'she must think'), lounging, slyly drinking.

'I'm not feeling very well,' he said. 'I had a giddy turn. I shall be better in a minute or so.' He sipped more brandy, almost, it seemed to him, defiantly.

She came over, armed with solicitude. 'Let me look at you. You're white. You've been overworking, that's what it is. You've been worrying too much. You've not been eating properly.'

Was there no escape from this incubus? He had one wife in hospital, drugged so that the heat was switched down enough to leave tears a fraction under boiling-point. He had another now in the school, goggling with the subdued amorousness of one who waits too long, wakes too late. And yet, he saw, she was the less to be trusted for all that; his rough rejection of her desire to insinuate herself further into his life, that would engender spite and a will to wound. Could it, he wondered, be her? But now her hand approached his forehead with the nervous excitement of a young girl. She took it away after the thin momentary contact, saying: 'Your head's hot. I think you must be a little feverish. Are you sure you're not starting 'flu or something? There's a lot of it about.'

'I'll be all right. I'm not as young as I was, that's all.'

'Now,' said Alice, 'I insist on coming in tonight to cook you a decent meal. No, I won't have you putting me *off* any more.'

'I've made arrangements to eat out. Some other time.'

'You won't put me off for ever, you know.' He knew, he

knew all right. 'When are they going to let her out?'

'Who? Which one?' It was ridiculous, this dual business. He wished one of them could be released from hospital, one way or another. His mother, they said, wasn't going to last very much longer.

`Frederica, of course. She seemed to me to be looking a lot better.'

'It's the drugs, you know.'

`Yes, the drugs. A man like you, if you don't mind me saying so, needs a lot of rest. Very highly strung, that's what you are. Now, Mr Crayshaw was a different type of man altogether. He didn't seem to worry about anything. Strong as a horse and always a joke on his lips.'

'All right, all right.' He stood up, the emptied glass in his hand, and walked over to the window. The school gardens, a baker's van parked in the drive, a dead sky over suburban residences. 'I'm a little tired, you know, of having all these past heroes hurled at me.' An absurd image. 'Like marble busts.' An absurder image. 'We've got a future to face. This is a new school. We must establish new traditions. You live in the past too much, my dear Alice.' He winced at that `dear', which had come out unbidden, and she simpered. The brandy traced a dull flame in his gullet; he started to be jumpy again. He said: 'Let me see those returns.'

He sat at the desk, and Alice stood beside him, her unpainted finger-nail pointing to an amount, a note, a subheading, explaining with almost a teacher's patience an occasional item. 'Yes, yes,' he said, 'I see that. They'll have to cut down.'

As she gathered up her papers again, she said: `If not tonight, perhaps tomorrow night. I'm free every evening, you see, and I'll be only too glad to do it. I'm a very good cook, so they say.'

'You ought to have married,' said Woolton, unthinking.

'Yes, I ought, I suppose,' she simpered. 'But' — giving him a straight look — 'I never found the right man.' He kneaded the little pile of black paper ash in the glass ash-tray, the matchstick he held pulping it down with tiny dull ringing noises. 'It wasn't,' she said, 'that I didn't have my offers. And, by the way, I think I ought to tell you this. Councillor Norman said he saw two members of the staff having dinner together in Charlbury. He was rather worried. He thought people would start talking about it. Do you want to know who they were?'

'Why shouldn't members of the staff have dinner together if they want to?'

'It was a man and a woman,' said Alice. 'It was Mrs Connor and Mr Howarth. Councillor Norman thought it might give the School a bad name. Two married people, like that. Don't you think, although I know it's not my place to say this, but don't you think you ought to take some sort of action?'

Woolton held back the rebuke she deserved. He said: 'What sort of action would Crayshaw have taken?'

'Mr Crayshaw? Oh, I couldn't say. It never happened in his time, you see, that sort of thing.' That was very much *touché,* thought Woolton. He said:

'You think it significant that *that sort of thing* should happen in my time?'

`Pardon?' He had to remind himself yet again that she was not very bright, could not respond to an idea that led round a corner. Nor was she really malicious.

'What action do you expect me to take?' he asked. 'I've no jurisdiction over what members of my staff do in their leisure moments. Besides, what's so particularly harmful in colleagues going out together? It strikes me your friend Councillor Norman has an unclean mind. I see nothing wrong at all in that sort of, that sort of . .

`Yes?' She was eager.

`Sodality. Nothing wrong at all. And even if there were something wrong, it would be none of my business.'

`People talk. It doesn't do the School any good.'

`I'm the best judge of what is or is not good for the School. I am, after all, the Headmaster.' The little flourish sounded hollow. It was a Stoic cry, straight out of Seneca.

`Well, I'm only passing on what Councillor Norman said to me. He may bring it up at the next Governors' meeting. He's only thinking of the School's good name.'

Woolton could not resist a small savage lunge. 'Councillor Norman seems in no way over-scrupulous about his own personal conduct. This prolonged affair with Mrs Catt . . :

`Well, you must do what you think fit. It's not my affair'

`I quite agree with you.'

Alice walked out, back to her comptometer and duplicating machine. Woolton felt as though he had already done a full day's work. He found some aspirin in the medicine-cupboard and washed a couple down with brandy and water. He took the bottle and the glass to his desk, sipping gently, calming himself. From the little row of narcotics — Virgil, Lucretius, Catullus, Propertius, Horace — he took Horace. For nearly an hour, in ode after ode, he conjured the Augustan summer — thyme, bees, Falernian in cooled flasks. The Latin vowels rang through his head like distant flock-bells, and he felt: 'Here the past and the future join hands, being both beyond corruption.' The lines chimed their steady quantities, and even the nymphs evoked were static, caught in a pose that could not change. He began dimly to see why he was, as far as this post was concerned, a failure. Who believes in progress must accept time, and he was starting to be sick of time, sick to death.

2

The anecdote about Luther, the poem by Luther — these led Howarth to abandon revision of the problems of verb-shunting in subordinate clauses. Howarth, if not his pupils, had been much and guiltily moved by the lines in the text-book:

`Der alt base Feind,
Mit Ernst err jetzt meint,
Gross Macht and viel List,
Sein grausam Riistung ist,
Auf Erd ist nicht reins gleichen:

Young Potter had translated these lines, not ineptly, as: 'The old bad enemy means business now. Great strength and a lot of cunning make up his gruesome weapons. There is nothing like him on earth.' Howarth decided that the ugly stubborn figure of the Reformer must be made real to them, the children who had no myths except what their comic papers and television sets provided. They fidgeted, one boy lounging and staring into interplanetary space, a little blonde girl regarding her teacher gravely, the thin lad with spectacles picking his nose, Peter attentive and aware of two sets of sanctions, Mr Howarth being the master in one world and the father in another. Twenty-eight of them in new shining desks, wishing for the bell's release. They must be fired with something.

`Martin Luther,' said Howarth, 'was a very great man. He was completely without fear and he was utterly devoted to the truth. He would not abandon his principles even when the Church of Rome condemned him, and because he stuck to his principles a very important movement in the history

of Europe took place. Can anybody tell me the name of this movement?'

Melvin Waters could.

'Yes, yes,' said Howarth, 'the Reformation. The break with the Church of Rome. The Church had become corrupt, it had lost sight of the simple truths of early Christianity. it had, moreover, become overloaded with unnecessary pomp and ceremony. The Pope cared more for luxury than for religion, and there were many abuses which worried honest men like Martin Luther. A man called Tetzel came from Rome to Germany, selling indulgences. Does anyone know what an indulgence is?'

Peter knew. He rattled off the Catechism answer: 'An indulgence is a remission granted by the Church of the temporal punishment which often remains due to sin after the guilt has been forgiven.'

'All right,' said Howarth hastily. He realised then, pretty fully, what he was doing to Peter. What would Canon Moon say about this? But he proceeded sturdily. 'Luther protested. Then he discovered that he had other things to protest about. The Sacraments, for instance. He denied that the bread and wine are really changed into the body and blood of Christ.'

Roberts in the front row yawned. 'If I see you yawn again in one of my lessons,' said Howarth, 'I'll hit you. I'll bang your head against the wall and pull out the hairs above your ears with tweezers. Then you shall be sent for the cane. Sit up straight.' Everybody sat up straight. 'Luther,' said Howarth, 'was summoned to the Diet of Worms and threatened with all kinds of punishments. But he stood firm. "Here I stand," he said. *"Ich kann nicht anders.* I can do nothing else." '

'You mean he couldn't sit down, sir?' asked a bright girl called Lorna Chattaway. Some of the class titttered. The bell

rang. Howarth shouted: *Ich kann nicht anders.* Remember that. Luther, a man who stood by what he believed, a man of courage. A man. Himself *eine feste Burg.'* It was neat, that, a neat ending. But nobody was impressed. Wrapped buns and sandwiches were produced, the corridors were already alive with feet and screams. Howarth at once entered the watertight compartment of the break, where teaching past and teaching to come were alike forgotten. He took his list of twenty-five names, the forms relating to the Paris trip, the applications needing signature, to the Headmaster's office. He knocked, fancied he heard a 'Come in', and then entered.

Woolson was sitting at his desk with an open book in front of him. He looked up, his eyes unsteady as though he found it hard to focus them. He listened abstractedly while Howarth explained, pointed out the places for Head Teacher's signature. 'Yes,' said Wootton. 'All right. Leave them here. You and your wife are in charge, then. You and your wife, Howarth. Tell me, are you happily married, Howarth?'

Howarth stared. 'I beg your pardon, Headmaster?'

'Quite right,' said Woolton. 'An impertinent question, I admit. I am told, quite rightly, that the trouble with me is that I'm too concerned about whether people are happy. Several people have told me that. It's the old-fashioned liberal in me. But a thing is no less valid for being old-fashioned, I should imagine. Oh, well, I just don't know these things.' He shrugged and then took from under his chair a nearly empty bottle. 'Brandy,' he said. 'Haven't taken much in the way of solid nourishment recently, Howarth. Must have something to keep going.'

'Are you feeling all right, sir?' asked Howarth. Wootton certainly didn't look as though he were. Woolson said:

'Are you happy in my school, Howarth? That, I think, is

a question I'm entitled to ask.' He didn't wait for an answer. `Are you happy working with *Doctor* Gardner? Do you get on with him? Are you a member of the Gardner Gang, if **I** may call it that? No, no, don't answer. There's no need to answer. Have a drink instead. No, of course, you can't. You would breathe fiery liquor over the children, and we couldn't have that, could we? The councillors and the aldermen, the great mayor himself — all these would be bound to find out, and then where would you be, eh? They would start saying that you were drunk all day and that you, too, were corrupting the young. What a delightful phrase that is — "corrupting the young". *Quod iuvenes corrupisset.'*

`What do you mean?' asked Howarth. 'Me, too? Who else is supposed to be corrupting the young?' So, he thought, Gardner had started the one-sided fight, armed with that limp leatherette weapon.

`A wonderful phrase,' said Wootton, 'isn't it? I can see that you have fallen under its spell just as I have. Ask *Doctor* Gardner what *he* thinks about corruption. **I** should imagine that he must have some very good ideas indeed about that.'

Howarth had a vision of the smiling Gardner with his cronies in the Dragon, spreading the poison, having tangible evidence to read out as the glasses were emptied and refilled and everybody could express gloating pious shock. What action to take? Wait a bit longer, Jack, just a bit longer. Give him enough rope. It's terrible that this sort of thing should be happening. And there was that business of the young teacher, and she of an old Quaker family, too. Alice saw that, you can trust Alice. Howarth began to see that, however much it was against one's will and convictions, sides had to be taken, the dreary corrupt world of politics had to be entered by the good and dispassionate, to protect or avenge the weak. But one always entered too late.

`Tell me, sir,' said Howarth quietly, 'what exactly has been happening?'

`Happening? So you know that something has been happening, eh? You can tell *me* what's been happening. You ought to know, you're among them all day, aren't you? They talk about me, don't they, talk about me?' He stood up, as though to deliver some sentence on Howarth. 'They're trying to frighten me away, but they won't, oh no.' His voice rang recklessly; he let his fist fall on the resonant wood. `I'm Headmaster here.' He fell back into his chair like a loose skein of bones and then seemed to recover. 'Well,' he said, shaking his head almost humorously, 'you'll be able to tell *Doctor* Gardner, and all the others, all the others, that old Woolton is breaking down under the strain. But I don't care. You can tell them precisely what you like. This is my school and I shall run it in my way. And, Howarth, if you propose going on seeing, socially or what you will, a certain female member of the staff, who am **I** to say you are not to? It is your life. I cling to my liberal views.'

`Who's been saying that?' asked Howarth. 'Who's been saying that I've . .

`Everybody, everybody. And, of course, it's come back to **me.** But if it makes you happy, Howarth, who am I, eh? Who am **I?'** He looked blank, as though that were a question to be answered and he himself unable to answer it. A question in ontology.

`There was nothing in it,' said Howarth. It was just the **one** occasion, it was perfectly friendly, you understand, perfectly friendly.'

`I shouldn't have thought it would be unfriendly.'

`No, what **I** meant was that there was no more to it than that. Just friendship. But it won't happen again, it certainly won't.' Woolton's distress had broken down the fixed brittle structure of relationship between assistant and headmaster.

`Don't worry, sir,' said Howarth, his head reeling at the absurdity of it all. 'I'm on your side. He won't get away with it, I won't let him.' *Ich kann nicht anders.* The bell rang. 'Are you all right now?' asked Howarth.

`I'm perfectly all right.' Wootton sighed. 'I'll sign these,' he said, taking his pen. 'That's what you came in for, wasn't it — for these to be signed?' He signed firmly. 'I ought to apologise,' he said. 'I don't think I've been very well, you know I think we ought to forget that I said what I said.'

`If you're perfectly sure you're all right.'

'I'm perfectly sure.' Woolton snapped that out. 'Here are your papers for going to Paris.' He handed them to Howarth. It was dismissal. Howarth went.

Ich kann nicht anders. Howarth walked firmly to Garner's study. He knew that Gardner was free now, and, as for his own lesson, the Sixth could get on for a while without him. Howarth knocked and, without waiting for an answer, walked in. Gardner was sitting alone, examining with evident pleasure some galley proofs. Here and there he made a careful correction in red. He had a red-ink pen and a blue-ink pen, and both were chubby and obviously expensive. Only the best for Gardner. `Ah, Chris,' he said. 'Come and see your name in print.' Howarth read: '. . . grateful acknowledgements to Mr Christopher G. Howarth, M.A., for invaluable suggestions and assistance.' Howarth picked up another sheet: `The Augustan Age saw itself as an extension of the ancient world. The fact that the ancient world spread through whole epochs of time, changing, decaying, rising again in the same rhythm as that of the modern age, was without significance for the men of the Age of Reason. They saw the classical era as static, homogeneous, arrested in stillness like the pattern on a vase . . .' Howarth read on. `But, Christ, man,' he said, appalled, `you've just lifted my stuff, word for word.'

`Here and there, Chris,' said Gardner evenly. `Most of it's my own, of course, but you expressed certain things so well. I couldn't improve on them, try as I would.'

`Where's my manuscript? This is sheer bloody plagiarism, Gardner. I should have known. I was a damned fool.'

`Take it easy, Chris, take it easy. It's at home somewhere. I'll let you have it back, don't worry.' He smiled soothingly, but his eyes had an ophidian coldness.

Howarth breathed deeply, trembling. 'All right,' he said at length. `You'll let me have it back. What I want to talk about is something more important.'

`Carry on, Chris. What's on your mind?' He spoke as though the other matter of plagiarism could hardly, legitimately, be supposed to be worthy of a place in Howarth's mind. 'Has Woolton been giving trouble?'

`Yes, it's Woolton I want to talk about. All this has got to stop.'

'I couldn't agree with you more, but it's awfully difficult to dislodge a headmaster, you know. You've got to have cast-iron proof of gross immorality or something like that. Mere inefficiency isn't enough.'

`Don't,' said Howarth, slipping into Lancashire, `act so bloody daft, man. You know perfectly well what I'm trying to say. This persecution's got to stop. You're at the back of it, you know damn well you are. He's upset, really upset. I've just been to see him now.'

`Upset, is he? Well.' Gardner looked interested. Howarth realised that he had been imprudent. 'And what's he upset about, if I may make so bold as to ask?'

`Persecution. Your persecution ..

Gardner cut in. 'I don't quite understand what you mean by persecution. If you mean that I've been criticising Woolton's way of running things, well, surely comment is free? I've a right to speak my mind, haven't I?'

`It's gone further than that. How about that girl's diary? You're spreading nasty filthy little stories about corruption, about his corrupting the young.'

`I don't like your tone,' said Gardner sternly. 'You'd better be careful, Chris. People have served long prison sentences for accusations like that. Slander, that's what it is. I've a good mind to ask you to repeat that before Dunhill. I'll have a witness, by God I will.' He made as for the door. The Senior Master's study was next to his.

`Oh, come off it. You know damn well that you've talked. And what you've done with that poor little girl I shudder to think. She's a bundle of nerves, poor little devil. You're a nasty piece of work, Gardner.' Glee welled up. 'A thoroughly rotten, despicable . .

Gardner stood up. 'I'm giving you fair warning, Howarth. I won't be spoken to like that. You think because I'm easy-going and friendly you can say what the hell you like. You'd better remember your position. And you'd better tidy up your own conduct before you start getting at me.'

`What exactly do you mean by that?'

`You and Hilda Connor. Sly, weren't you? Cunning. I'd never have known a thing if it hadn't been for somebody outside the School. I was ashamed. I felt let down. A member of my own department. To be told by a common kitchen worker that you'd been carrying on in the dining-hall ..

`You're a bloody hypocrite. A bloody fat hypocrite, that's what you are. And a liar. Now listen to me. This persecution of Woolton has got to stop. Is that clear?'

`I'm warning you ..

`I want that diary. That's the first thing. I'll get that out of your hands for a start. Hand it over.'

Gardner laughed. 'You really are a fool, you know.'

Howarth advanced. 'I've never done much fighting,' he said. 'But I think I could sort you out without much difficulty.

I'll make your fat shake, you horrible hypocritical fat slug.'

`You keep off.' Gardner held out warding-off arms. 'I haven't got it, anyway. I'll call Dunhill if you come a step nearer.'

e what's in this drawer,' said Howarth.

`You leave that drawer alone. There's nothing there.'

Howarth pulled it open. Gardner was upon him, trying to tear Howarth's hands away. In the stupid panting struggle the drawer-tray came out entirely. A mass of papers shuffled on to the floor. Howarth recognised a shabby clipped mass of typescript as his own. He snatched it up. There was no diary to be seen.

`I'll have this anyway,' said Howarth, 'you bloody thief.'

`You've no right.' Gardner was tremulous, sweating. 'You gave it me. It's my property.' But Howarth was now at the other drawers, pulling out the trays. Papers, pencils, rubber bands fell sadly to the floor. At last Howarth saw what he was seeking. A little book in leatherette. Gardner hurled himself on his colleague, tore, clawed. Panting, they were both up against the door. Gardner snatched the typescript and began shredding it as for an urgent paper-chase. Howarth saw the title-page ripped and ripped: *Plutarch and Augustan French Literature. By Christopher G. Howarth.*

`You bloody thief,' said Howarth. He opened the door. Gay was going by with a band of boys for a walk or work-out. The boys saw two dishevelled masters, one of them tearing like mad, heard one say: 'That's what you are, a bloody thief.' They admired the disorder of the room. Gay said:

`Come on, my tigers. On our way.' Dunhill came from next door, his tattered mortarboard on. He gazed without rancour or even interest at the two flushed masters, his Great Dane's jowls hanging sadly. He said:

`Sounded like somebody getting murdered.'

Gardner was still tearing away, so that Plutarch and

French Augustan literature snowed and snowed till the floor was like the cage of some big white rat. Which it was, thought Howarth. He had to grin, fingering the diary which he proposed to burn as soon as he got home, but he stopped grinning when it became apparent that Gardner did not care whether he had the diary or not.

Four

PETER HOWARTH knelt in the dark little box, his heart as always — fluttering because of the musty holy smell. He prayed his exordial prayer in a boy's gabble.

`Bless me Father for I have sinned exceedingly in thought word and deed through my fault through my fault through my most grievous fault. It is two weeks since my last confession.'

The figure of the man who performed the Sunday miracle could be but dimly seen through the grille. It stirred and moved in a rustle of linen, as though impatient with the prospect of a boy's small sins. Peter said: 'And during that time I missed my morning prayers because I was late for school. I was inattentive at Mass and I had impure thoughts and I used bad language.'

`What sort of impure thoughts?'

`I . . . It was about girls, Father.'

'Do you go to a mixed school?'

`Yes, Father.'

`Are most of your companions non-Catholic?'

`Yes, Father.'

`It's all this dirty talk that causes the trouble. That makes you think about impure things. It may very easily lead you into serious sin. You mustn't listen to this dirty talk.' Peter could see more clearly through the grille now. He *saw* that on the table before the Canon was a newspaper page, and that on this page were photographs of horses, all with jockeys up. The Canon said: 'Anything else?'

`Well, Father. About the Reformation, Father.' He couldn't put it into words.

`What do you mean, the Reformation?'

It was difficult. 'About Luther, Father. One of the masters said that Martin Luther was a good man, and I thought he was a good man, too.'

`He was not a good man.' The Canon thumped his racing page. 'He was a misguided and sinful man. You must be on your guard against that sort of thing. Luther was an enemy of the Church, remember, a bitter and unscrupulous enemy.'

`Bose Feind,' said Peter incontinently.

`What's that, what's that?'

`That's in the book, Father. It's from one of the poems that Luther wrote.'

`You mustn't read the poems that Luther wrote, you mustn't have anything to do with the man or with his writings.' He spoke as though Luther were still going strong over there in Germany, still blasting away at the Diet of Worms. 'You must be on your guard,' he said. 'That's the way some people lose their faith.'

`But it's in the book, Father, and it's a book we have in class.'

`I see, I see.' The Canon sighed. Beleaguered, besieged, the English Catholics. 'Anyway,' he said, 'close your ears as much as you can. Why they have to teach German Protestantism as well as their own, I just can't understand. They should be satisfied with their Church of England.' A thought struck him. 'This was not,' he said, 'a period of what they call Religious Instruction, was it? Because you know perfectly well that there's an arrangement for Catholics ..

`A German lesson, Father.'

`Well, your German teacher should confine himself to teaching German and not extolling the enemies of the Church. A German lesson should not be employed by Protestant teachers for their own propaganda.'

`The teacher isn't Protestant, Father. The teacher's my father, Father.'

The Canon pondered that, gripping his racing paper hard.

`Well,' he said. 'I see,' he added. 'Most unfortunate,' he super-added. 'We must think about this,' he said. 'In the meantime, five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys today and tomorrow. Make a good act of contrition. Your father. Really.' He droned the Absolution and Peter prayed:

`. . . And I firmly resolve by the help of Thy grace never to offend Thee again and carefully to avoid the occasions of sin.'

`Go in peace,' said the Canon, 'and God bless you.'

Peter said his penance before the garish crucifix, in the warm smell of the votive candles. He then walked out of the church, pounds lighter, blessing himself as he went with chilly holy water from the stoup in the vestibule. His exhilaration, as always after confession, was tempered by awareness of the dangers that panted about him, the need to be especially vigilant between now and communion tomorrow. The streets crackled with spiritual peril: the abandoned luscious figure on the cinema hoarding and the legs of the women trotting round the Saturday shops. As he walked towards the bus-stop he felt the clean tiny matchflame threatened, for there on the pavement larked and guffawed Rich and two companions. They wore mackintoshes and chewed gum with rotary cow-mouths. One of them carried a gramophone record, a double radius of shop-ribbon looped through its hole.

`Hallo, kid,' greeted Rich. 'I seen you coming out of that there church. It isn't Sunday, kid.' Rich was smarting. Peter Howarth's father had told Linda Hardy that she had nothing further to worry about. The diary had been burned. Linda Hardy and her two friends had celebrated by untidying

Rich's desk (he knew it was them, the bitches) and tying Rich's mackintosh into many knots — a big task, requiring the strength of three strapping girls. The mackintosh showed now (it had taken him hours to unknot) unbelievably wrinkled, so that adult passers-by were not above staring at it. One of Rich's companions said:

`He's been telling his horrible bad sins.'

`Daft, that is,' said Rich.

Peter said nothing. He was old enough to know that a teacher's son was always in an unfair position. His schoolfellows found him a useful burnable effigy of his father. They had to suffer the master's sarcasm, his real or fancied victimisation, but they could always vent their desire for revenge on his son.

`You going to Paris, kid?' asked Rich.

`No,' said Peter. 'I've been there before.'

`You tell your dad to take us round some of them nood places,' said Rich. He and another youth made Zulu clicking noises.

`I've got to catch the bus,' said Peter.

`Your dad,' said Rich, 'knows a nice bit of stuff when he sees it. I'll say that for him'

`I'll have to go now,' said Peter. The bus had come in, and the three chortlers were in his path.

`No hurry,' said the youth with the gramophone record. `Plenty more. Or you can always walk home.'

`It's three miles. They only run every two hours. Let me pass.'

`Posh,' said Rich, roundly chewing. 'Speaks posh like his dad. "Let me porss." You like to see something, kid?' His friends haw-hawed out of raw unsure throats. Peter thought of his ancestor, brave on the scaffold. But it was the thumbscrew he feared.

`Here,' said the youth with the gramophone record. He produced from full pockets (a lad evidently well-endowed with this world's goods) a scabrous pen-drawing. Peter tried to push through the circle of his tormentors. The bus was steadily filling. The driver and conductor were stubbing out their fags.

`Very rude to do that, that is,' said Rich evenly. 'Your dad's taught you no manners.' He helped to hold Peter. The busmen were climbing in. With an arm-breaking wrench Peter ripped himself away. The torturers grabbed his cap but, with a thumb on the dam-leak of tears, he ran. Panting, he made it, as the gears of the groaning dragon were engaged. 'Ought to get here on time, you ought,' reproved the conductor.

Peter, capless, debated within himself the eschatological position of this incident. Had he sinned in just catching a glimpse of those badly drawn bodies, with their ballooning words of calm proposal and acceptance? It was not his fault, any more than that Luther business. He began to envy his schoolmates If they didn't believe in hell, did hell perhaps not exist for them? It wasn't fair, being a Catholic.

He travelled home, confused, thinking. A boy played cricket. It was a hot day and you could smell the grass and thirsted for ginger-beer. The umpire called 'Over'. The boy-batsman was hit by the first ball and perhaps something broke and he died, there on the school cricket-field. He had committed some sin or other and was at once in hell. The sun shone fiercely, however, and there were five balls of the over still to come. The flannelled boys and the two umpires stood round his corpse, but nothing could alter the fact that there were still five balls to come. The warm world was still going on, and there that boy was, thrust in hell, between the first and second balls of the over.

It was not fair.

He got off the bus and already, down the street, he could

hear the cat Sirikit screaming as though she were in hell. Cats, however, did not go there. She was on heat, and when she was like that she screamed the house down. His father said it was her mating-call. He longed for real everyday comforting things now, as he walked round to the back door. He wanted tea, cake, the feel of Sirikit's brown fur. He paused before he opened the door, listening to the two voices riding over Sirikit's loud song. They were talking about him.

'I said from the beginning it was wrong to go there. '

'He has to be educated somewhere.' His father's deep blurred voice.

`He's learning the wrong things. The wrong history. He's getting no real religious instruction.

`Canon Moon . . Sirikit pumped up scream after scream, loud, louder, louder, loudest.

`He'll have to leave,' said his mother.

`Don't be silly. He can't leave. You're fussing too much about small things.'

`But it's too bad when his own father turns out to be the traitor ..

`Oh, what absolute nonsense.'

Peter turned away, into the back garden. He should never have mentioned Luther to his mother. He had meant no harm, he had not been complaining. She had just asked what he'd learned that day. He himself had, unwittingly, been the traitor. If only, he thought sadly, he could make this world — the garden, the sky, the cinema, tea, the cat — the real one and be happy in the sun.

(Whose fault was it, he wondered, that he had lost his cap?)

A little spring sun was glowing and honeying the corrugated iron of the coal-shed. He went into the dark close hole and sat on the pile of small logs. Lumps of coal made

a shining black hill in the cobwebbed corner. The place smelt of cats and in the dust were the merds of visiting dogs.

The other Peter Howarth was being drawn along in a cart, his hands bound behind him. The patient and indifferent horse pulled slowly, letting the crowd feast its eyes on him, the traitor. In London, meanwhile, Shakespeare was writing, finding the snarls and howls of the bear-pit a distraction, and the Queen examined her bad teeth in the tiniest of mirrors. Peter Howarth had lost his cap. He was thin, long-haired, handsome with a pointed beard. He wore only a shirt above his slashed trunks and hose. His head was held high over the jeers. In the crowd could be seen, quite clearly, Master Rich, Master Gilpin, Master Mimms and others. They sucked oranges, occasionally raising their juicy muzzles to jeer. The cart halted under the gallows. The hangman had the strong bare arms of Mr Stopworth, English master, but his face was half-hidden under a black mask. Water bubbled in a cauldron over a pungent wood fire. Peter Howarth tried to speak, but the crowd howled down his words. 'In that, though the Queen hath done great harm to divers of her subjects, yet do I protest still my loyalty, acknowledging no foreign prince.' A Protestant clergyman, Master Doctor Gardner, plump and in spectacles, opened a prayer-book and asked Peter Howarth whether he repented of his sins. The reply came, firm and clear: *Ich kann nicht anders.'* A great noise arose from the crowd; Master Rich did hurl with main force the peel of his orange, missing however. Peter Howarth looked for the last time on the timbered and thatched houses. For some reason a red bus, loaded with sightseers, had halted by the green. It was wiped out at once, intruder. The rope was tightened round Peter Howarth's neck, the cart drew away with a jerk (the old horse chewed, unconcerned) and then Peter Howarth

swung in the air. The hangman thrust his knife into the dying man's belly, like carving a pudding, and quickly raised before Peter Howarth's eyes a smoking pluck of entrails.

`Hurray

T00000000I'

'So perish all the Queen's enemies.'

`Thou speakest Booth, Master Gilpin, verily thou dost.'

`Hurray!'

There was a groan from the crowd as Peter Howarth died, and many prepared to go home (buses appeared again) as the executioner, his last office over, threw the entrails into the boiling cauldron.

Straight to heaven. All martyrs went straight to heaven. Not even any Purgatory for them. Martyrdom was the only sure way, ultimately the only way out. But there were no martyrs nowadays. A pity. From the house came Sirikit's screams; she was enjoying her own martyrdom.

Peter restlessly wandered round the overgrown garden, kicking a stone here, there a piece of bottle-glass. Behind the red-robed tribunal the torturers waited, armed with their instruments, black-masked. Itepentest thou, 0 miserable sinner, of thine heresy?'

kann nicht anders:

`Very well, then. We shall have an *auto-da-fe.'*

His mother's fist and voice were at the window. She banged on the glass, making a silver rattle, smiling.

`Where've you been all this time? Tea's ready. Where's your cap?'

`I lost it.' But that was not strictly true. 'Some boys from the School were larking about. They took it from me.'

`You see,' said Veronica in triumph.

0 world of warmth and flesh and cat's fur and tea ready. In the kitchen-living-room Sirikit was shamelessly wooing

his father. From her throat came a low brown sound. She knew the male smell.

`Down, damn you!' His father tried to unhook the cat's stiff quivering body, which was fastened to his chest with four sets of deeply grappling claws. He threw Sirikit to the floor where, ecstatic, she rolled and writhed and growled. Peter noticed that his mother looked happy as she clattered cups, laying the table. Something had happened to please her. With a shock Peter saw that his father had the face of the martyred other Peter Howarth.

`My boy,' said his father, want to say that I'm sorry about that Luther business. I just didn't think. You see, a teacher has to try and interest his class, and he has to take what comes. Teaching is a kind of acting, really. I was just acting a sort of enthusiasm for Martin Luther.' For some reason Peter's spirits began to sink; he felt that it was now that his father was betraying him. 'Tomorrow,' continued his father, 'I shall come to Mass with you. At Easter, when your mother and I are in Paris together, I propose to make my. Easter duty in the Madeleine. I shall go to confession before that, of course, and I shall make my confession in French. My sins won't sound too bad that way. They'll sound like the sins of somebody in a French novel.' He paused, thinking that he had read no French novel, so far as he knew, in which anybody had actually sinned, fictional sin having become the monopoly of the English Catholic novelists.

Peter could not understand this feeling of disappointment in his father, the feeling that his father had somehow let him down. Martyrdom was the only way, the only way to be free of the whole puzzling business.

The cat crouched in a corner and began to howl again, its eyes very bright. Over the warm stream of tea and the rattle of spoons and the cosy munch of cake, the jungle

noise rose again from her throbbing throat. Martyrdom.

`Ich kann nicht antlers,' said Peter, apparently apropos of nothing.

'Good,' said his father. 'But watch that *ch,* will you? It's the sound you get at the beginning of "humour" and "huge". An unvoiced palatal semi-vowel.'

Five

'G 001)-BYE, Peter, Good-bye ! Give them all our love I' And so Peter went chugging north, waving. He would be met at Preston, he would be shot in the shooting-brake to the farm beyond Bamber Bridge, he would flourish — the whole of the Easter holiday — in a healthy rustic Catholic environment. Environment, as Woolton was always saying, was so important.

So term was over and Howarth knew that next term would *ing real war. He knew where he stood now, anyway; he had taken sides. April's sharp smells and soft rains reminded him that he was not getting any younger. It would be foolish to follow up that avowal which broke a dining-hall window. Hilda, however, was clearly puzzled. On the last day of term she had, sitting in the men's staff-room after lunch, looked at him over her coffee-cup, puzzled. She had sat there, warm, painted, scented, silk-legged, a cream chiffon bosom under a well-cut brown costume, desirable and puzzled. Howarth felt sure — the war on, Veronica's health to be watched — that he was doing the right thing. Let her stay puzzled. But she had said:

'I wish I were coming to Paris with you. It's not going to be much fun for me, as a matter of fact, what with Sweetypie' (that was her husband) 'not getting any leave and these friends of mother's coming down for Easter. They're rather sweet, but very boring. They can only talk about the old days in India. They make India sound quite dull and colour-

less.' She had crossed her legs, misty-bracken silk.

Howarth should by rights have said: 'Oh, my dear, if only it were you coming with me . . .' But he had been non-committal, polite, cool. And she had been puzzled, getting into her purring car, whisking herself off down the long road of the Easter holidays.

As for Gardner, he had kept out of Gardner's way. Gardner had reciprocated. Next term promised to be interesting.

As Howarth and Veronica left the railway station, Veronica said: 'I think, darling, I ought really to buy a new dress, you know. Out of mother's five pounds.' Her birthday was two days old. Leary had given her a bottle of Cointreau, Peter a box of stationery, Howarth a new compact. Her mother had been the most generous. It was a pity, thought Howarth, sniffing the grey market-day with the pubs open all afternoon, to spend five pounds on a new dress. Still, she seemed so much better, looking forward to the holiday; let a new dress crown her returned health.

In the town the farmers ruled and revelled — red mottled faces and cattle-prodding sticks, shapeless hats and Norfolk breeches. Ayrshires, Herefords, Friesians, Guernseys breathed warm and lowed in the market-pens, bearing on their backs huge tea-stains, black and white cloudscapes, or maps of *terra incognita.* Bristled reeking boars and sows snored and truffled. A bleating sale of grazing tegs, ewes and couples was on. The town was rich today in the blessed beasthood of the older gods, brown and red and golden through the drizzle.

Veronica and Howarth shopped. Waiting outside a dress-store, Howarth was accosted by the poet-journalist only slightly drunk. 'Look at this,' he said, thrusting mare lines of his growing mock epic on Howarth. 'This is *first-class,* it really is.' Howarth read:

`Here ruined farmers, in new hacking-coats,
Pour Scotch and ram fat bacon down their throats;
And children, obdurately red and flaxen,
Proclaim the crass inbreeding of the Saxon.
Observe the maidens who, with brawny arms,
Gush the seductive fragrance of the farms.
They feel the body should be mainly meat,
That ankles have no function and that feet,
Disdaining shape and glorying in size,
Should shout a curious kinship with the thighs.'

`Yes, yes,' agreed Howarth, 'remarkable.'

But lest with so much weight the streets should rock,
The desiccated matrons of good stock
(But not for soup) tune their patrician reeds
In shops which specialise in tasteless tweeds,
Then hog the pavements with their barking spouses
Before they seek their deathwatch-rotting houses.'

The poet-journalist drooled off, praising his own gift, into the Black Bull. It would be good to see France again, thought Howarth, viewing the decayed town through the poet's words, the galvanic life of an England which had spewed up the old values. Veronica came out of the shop, bubbling that she had found the very dress she wanted. Howarth smiled at her and took her hand.

They went drinking, elated by the peculiar guilt of seeming to break the licensing laws. The pubs were swaying and whisky-swimming with farmers, coal merchants, estate agents, bookmakers and the civic fathers. Veronica and Howarth drank in the Ship, the Crown, the Three Tuns, the Black Bull. In the Black Bull the poet was intoning:

The manor gates are down, the past is dead.
The military police patrol instead,
Save there, where feudalism's greasy scraps
Still touch the villagers who touch their caps
To soap-king's lady or to upstart lord
Who licked the party's boots or swelled its hoard,
Trimming like mad or clinging like a louse
To be translated to the Upper House,
Whence now he comes to dogmatise and hector,
Sway the church sycophants and hound the rector.'

After the eighth glass they felt the god descend, the warmth of beer a shield against the drizzle, the future still capable of good, a holiday ahead. The barked talk of the drinkers seemed to become significant. Howarth and his wife were ready to listen with sympathy and interest to tales of bad legs, sons lost in the war, the inadequate government subsidies, the prize bull that was worth double, the nagging wives, old age creeping on, things not as they used to be, the country finished, so long as the mad generous rounds — paid for with dirty notes skinned from an endless wad — continued and continued.

`Beer? Nonsense, bloody nonsense. You'll have Scotch, double Scotch, that's what you'll have. You, lady, a nice gin and tonic. I like you two, I've seen you in here before. I was saying to old Jack here. Jack, come here. Where the hell's old Jack? He's not gone. He bloody well has gone. Has he seen about that yet? Well, it doesn't matter. It's a short bloody life anyway. And the way things are going. But I've enjoyed my time, I'll say that. Ah, yes, I'll say that. They can take all I've got, and they bloody well are doing, but I've enjoyed my time. Work? They don't know what work is. And the old cow in calf. And the foot-and-mouth.

And the price of feeding-stuffs. Now, what is it, the same again? Come on now, or you'll offend me. Right, drink up. One, three, six, seven, ten, call it ten, Edith. Ten doubles and a large gin for the lady, what's your name, love?' And a couple of skins off the large farmer's wad.

Howarth and his wife swayed to the White Horse. It stayed open officially, this market-day, till five; but as it was due to reopen at six it hardly seemed worthwhile for it to close at all. 'Oh, God,' said Howarth, 'it's Gardner.' He hesitated, not sure whether or not they ought to leave. But admission to the pub was, during this hour of official closing, to be regarded *as* a favour; it would seem most boorish to walk out without buying a drink first. Gardner was at the bar, his back to them, ordering a round of shining shorts for his friends—the councillors and aldermen who were doubly off duty from council-chamber and timber-yard, shop, or real-estate office. The place sang and reeked with smoke and anecdote. Howarth greeted the landlady, a painted, enamelled, corseted, high-heeled sixty-five, and asked quietly for two bitters. But Gardner turned, saw them, and called out cheerfully:

`Hallo, Chris. Hallo, Mrs Howarth. What are you going to have?'

`Yes,' thought Howarth; 'he doesn't need that diary any more, he's destroyed the incriminating original of his doctoral thesis, he'll bear no malice, he thinks it pays him not to.' Unsure, not responding to the greeting, he heard Veronica accept the offer of a drink. He heard himself saying:

'Thanks. I'll have a double Scotch.'

'Another double, please, Brenda.'

'Yes, Doctor.'

Embarrassed, alert for traps, Howarth raised a glass along with Pismire, Burton, Shaw, Claydon, Higgins, others. The

health of the generous drink-giver. Cheers, cheers, cheers, all the very best, God bless you, Herbert.

'Chris here,' said Gardner, his big spectacles gulping the light like blind mouths, 'is one of the best.' He put his arm round Howarth's waist. *'You* know that, of course, Mrs Howarth, but a lot of people don't. He's a man who speaks out, who isn't afraid of saying what he thinks. Not like some people we could mention, eh, Frank?' Howarth mumbled, looking into his glass, Gardner's podgy arm tightening in the show of affection. 'We get on, don't we, Chris? He says what he likes to me and I say what I like to him. Neither of us bears any malice.' Howarth looked curiously at the hard, lined faces — Pismire scratching his nose, Claydon tilting a gin. 'What do they want with me? What is to be my role in the Gardnerian universe?' He felt a shaft of self-disgust. 'Why the hell don't I say what I really think of them, why am I so unutterably, so thoroughly ..

'I don't feel very well, Chris.' She was white, unsteady, spilling gin on the floor. The glass fell from her limp fingers as Howarth moved to her side. The floor by her seemed flooded in gin. 'What's the matter, dear?' Solicitude bathed his whole being like electric light. 'Get her a chair somebody, please. Some water, quick ..

Veronica fell on to the floor, a stack of beer-crates grazing her head and knocking her hat grotesquely over her eyes. It seemed a dead faint. She breathed hard, her snoring mouth open. Howarth tried to lift her shoulders. 'Don't do that,' snapped Gardner. 'It's the worst possible thing.' The dolled-up, ginned-up landlady cried: 'They shouldn't drink if they can't take it. It's after closing-time. Get her out of here. I've got my licence to think of . . ."Be quiet,' ordered Gardner. 'She's ill.' They carried her — Gardner and Howarth at her shoulders, Shaw supporting her legs — to the couch in the lounge-bar. The other drinkers stood and sat around, holding glasses that now seemed frivolous, indecent, toy trumpets in church.

Her eyes opened. Howarth, feeling a faint, almost non-existent pulse, heard her say, in a whisper almost without breath: 'Get me home. Quick. It's . . .' Her skin was dewy and clammy. Her eyes pointed upwards again, and then the lids shelled them. In panic Howarth said to Gardner: 'Is your car here?'

'It's at the front. I'll bring it up to the back door.' Swift as a beetle he was away. As they heard its engine approach and then stop, Howarth and two of the councillors (or possibly a councillor and an alderman) lifted Veronica's dead weight, carried her past the bar, the barrels, the landlady's disapproval, a moustached man who was saying: 'Test the sparking plugs for gap,' the rest of the pub's embarrassrnent, to the door and the waiting car. Propped in the back seat, she leaned, sheer heaviness, agalirt Howarth. A councillor or alderman said: 'This here parcel must be yours,' and threw in Veronica's new dress in its wrapping. 'The .screwed sleeve on the armature spindle,' the moustached man was saying with a sort of desperation. 'Home,' said Howarth. 'We'd better take her straight home.'

'Home nothing,' snapped the Head of the Modern Languages Department. 'We'll take her to the Crichton.'

'But . .

'Shut up. I know best.' And Gardner sped as best he could, honking at the obstructing cattle, the jammed traffic of market-day. 'Out of the bloody way !' he yelled at a pair of swaying farmers in the road. The poet-journalist was reciting to the damp air. Up the hill, clearer of traffic, the engine growled. Howarth noticed that the back-seat ash-trays were empty and clean, sign of the successful man. They drove into the crescent of the hospital and Howarth felt a small relief. Capable hands here, they would know what to do. In

the Out-Patients' Department they resigned their burden. She was still out, dead white, snoring slightly.

'You'll be all right on your own, Chris?' asked Gardner. 'There's no point in my staying, is there? Let me know how she is.'

'Thanks, Herbert,' mumbled Howarth. 'I'm very grateful.' One never knew when one would need one's enemy. The necessity to regard Gardner as an enemy now, for some reason, seemed to grow greater. Gardner patted Howarth on the arm and went. Back to the interrupted drinking and conspiracy. Or perhaps to say: 'She was obviously tight, old man. If she were my wife I wouldn't let her knock back that amount.' But of course not, not that. Not after he'd insisted on bringing her here. Besides, he could now say: 'Carrying on with another woman when his wife's ill. Disgusting, I call it.' Thank God he'd refused to let that develop.

He paced the vestibule, leaving his trouble in the hands of the dispassionate experts, to whom the body was a sort of car. Leary eventually appeared, brisk, with frowning black eyebrows, the grey hair over his young face.

'She's losing a lot of blood,' he said. 'It can't go on. We're having her in. I've insisted on a bed immediately.'

'What's the trouble?'

'That's what we've got to find out. Don't worry — not that you will, of course. She's in good hands.'

'What do you mean — not that I will?'

'All right, forget it. You go home now and get some things for her and come back here about eight.'

'Is she going to be all right? You must have some idea.'

'She'll be all right, Howarth. I'll look after her.'

'Yes,' said Howarth. 'I know that.' He shuffled out of the white aseptic vestibule and went to wait for a bus back to Chipping Wellwater. The day after tomorrow they were supposed to be going to France. He remembered that her

new dress, bought for this holiday, was still in Gardner's car. There was not much point in going to collect it.

2

IN THAT same hospital, in a private ward, Woolton sat with his mother. There was not much left of her except talk Bright-eyed, she rambled on and on happily.

'That fish in the larder will go bad if it's not cooked soon. The price of fish since the war is a disgrace. But of course nothing's been the same since then.' Woolton waited patiently for the clue which would tell him which war. 'And your poor father's not the same, either, since he came back.' That eliminated one war. 'The heat didn't agree with him out there, and the flies, too. Fish, he said, the smell of the fish in the market in Damascus was, and these were his own words, really overpowering.' That eliminated the Boer War. 'Still, we had good times on his leaves. We saw the *Bing. Boys* twice and *Chu Chin Chow.* Even then he was too old really for the army but he would insist on going. Headstrong, like all his family. But with all their headstrongness they never had much money.' She chuckled. 'Different with us. Nobody knows how much I've got tucked away. If they did know they'd be buzzing round like flies on that fish in the larder.' Back to fish, some ancient long-eaten fish that still glowed strong in her memory. She seemed to doze off, but a couple of minutes later she was back again. 'They don't know how much I've got and they don't know who I'm leaving it to. They don't know whether it's a dogs' home or a cats' home.' She chuckled again. 'It would buy a lot of fish for a cats' home, that it would, my word it would. There's one who thinks I'm leaving it to him, but that's where he's mistaken. Everybody's got to be punished for what they do

taking twenty-five children. All the arrangements have been made.'

`You mean,' said Leary, 'that this is an official duty?'

`You can call it that, yes.'

'I see. Well,' said Leary, 'you'd better go on your own.'

`I'll hand over to somebody else,' said Howarth. 'There isn't much time, but I'd better try. It's not right that I should go when Veronica's ill.'

'I think it's much better that you do go,' said Leary. He gazed at Howarth with what looked like grave distaste. 'I think it would be a very good thing for you to get out of the way for a bit.'

'I'd rather ..

`Never mind what you'd rather. I'm the doctor. I know what's right. Is Peter going on this trip?'

`Peter's gone to his grandmother's.'

`That's all right, then. Everything's all right. You lock up the house and take those children to Paris.'

`Oh, Charles !' Veronica wailed weakly from her pillow. 'What a shame. This was to be my holiday, my first for heaven knows how long.'

'It can't be helped, my dear. You'll get a holiday when all this is over.'

'All what? What's the matter with me?'

'Oh, nothing much. But you need treatment of some sort. Now you get off to Paris, Howarth.' He spoke as though the boat-train were waiting outside. 'Veronica's going to be well looked after. There's nothing you can do. She's in very good hands.'

`If you say so ..

'I do say so. And now you'd better go and let Veronica get some rest. You can come in and see her tomorrow.'

Leary went out with Howarth. Howarth asked: 'What exactly is the matter with her?'

Leary shrugged and grimaced. 'It's hard to say. We're getting the specialist in as soon as we can. I'm inclined to think it's a fibro-myoma.'

'What's that?'

'A submucous fibroid. A sort of minor tumour.'

But she had all this before and they didn't find anything like that then.'

`That might have been a different kind of haemorrhage. I've told you before, Howarth, a woman's internal economy is a very strange and subtle thing. We still don't know much about it, you know.'

`If it's what you say it is, will there have to be an operation?'

'It's simple enough. Just the removal of the growth. If it is that, of course. There may be something growing on the cervix, in which case ... not a gynaecologist, Howarth. We'll soon know what it really is.'

`Will she be all right?'

'Of course she'll be all right. Don't be a fool.' Leary spoke loudly. `Do you think I wouldn't do everything I possibly could, everything?'

Howarth was startled by this warmth, this ardour sparking through the wet palatalised consonants. A strange thought came to him. 'Are you in love with Veronica?' He realised as soon as he'd said it that he shouldn't have.

Leary stared back, his black thick eyebrows beetling. That question is absolutely irrelevant. That question has nothing to do with this business of her ailment. That was a stupid question and a foolish question and a wicked question. Now get out of this hospital and let me get on with my work.'

Howarth nodded and nodded. 'I see,' he said.

`You see nothing,' said Leary, with force. 'You see nothing at all.'

`I'd still like an answer to my question.'

`The happiness of my patients is something I'm entitled to consult. If you want to know the truth, I think that you've been a bad husband to Veronica. You upset her, sneering at the Church, sticking in your ill-paid little rut, not giving her the things she's used to. But if you think I'd be such a swine as to try to break up a marriage, even an unsuccessful one.... It's not a question of personal decency, personal ethics. It's a question of being a good Catholic. But perhaps you wouldn't understand that.'

'You don't like me very much, do you?'

Leary didn't answer that one; he didn't need to. 'Oh,' he said, 'you go off. You get out of Veronica's way. Get off to Paris.' Never before, Howarth thought, had Paris sounded so wicked.

4

When Woolton got home he found Alice waiting for him, Alice in a flowery apron, the cat on the hearth, a smell of cooking from the oven. 'You sit down,' said Alice, `and rest. You look dead beat. Let me get you your slippers.'

`No, that's all right, really.' She straightened the anti-macassar on his usual- arm-chair and smoothed the seat with her hand. 'Really, there's no need ..

`You sit down and rest. Supper will be ready in a minute. I've made a fish-pie.'

`Yes, yes, of course, that fish in the larder. My mother will be pleased.' He shook himself sensible. 'I beg your pardon. I was thinking of something else.'

`Tired, that's what you are. And how is she?'

`Who? Which one?'

`Both.'

'My mother can't last much longer. She's rambling, poor old lady. My wife, Frederica, seems slightly better. Much less inclined to fly off the handle. That course of drugs seems to be doing some good. Look, there was no need to cook anything for me, you know. I could quite easily eat something at the Dragon.'

`It's cooked now. A nice fish-pie. And prunes to follow. Prunes and fish are both very good for the brain.' Woolton smiled at that. 'It's no trouble,' said Alice, `no trouble at all. It's a real pleasure to be doing something for you.'

`Well, this is all very kind.' The table was neatly laid for one. There were a couple of daffodils in a vase. In the Chinese ginger-jar on the sideboard was a bunch of narcissi. 'But aren't you going to eat something?'

'I'm not very hungry. I'd just rather watch you eat.' She went off in her flowery apron to the kitchen and came back shyly holding a wine-bottle. 'I got this for you,' she said. 'It's a bottle of Chablis. Chablis is supposed to go very well with fish.'

`Oh yes, it does. This is most kind, really . .

`Could you open it, do you think?' She giggled. 'I couldn't find the corkscrew, if there *is* a corkscrew.'

`Allow me.' He found a corkscrew and opened the bottle while she looked on, the little woman, at his bottle-opening male strength.

`Now, if you'd just sit down,' said Alice, 'I'll serve.' He obeyed. The fish-pie was good, he had to admit that, good as fish-pie went. He didn't particularly like fish-pie. She stood, arms folded across her bosom, smilingly watching him eat. From the sitting-room came the noise of the telephone. He began to get up. 'No,' she said. 'Stay where you are. That's how you get indigestion.'

'But it may be urgent, may be the hospital . .

`I'll answer it. Get on with your supper.' And she changed

from little woman to stern secretary, striding to the sitting-room. Woolton waited, watching his fish-pie cool. He could hear her intonations, calm, slow, secretarial.

`Who was it?' he asked when she returned.

She changed back to little aproned woman, standing before the fireplace, smiling shyly. 'It was only Howarth.'

`Howarth? Howarth? What does Howarth want?'

`Apparently his wife took ill this afternoon. She's in hospital.'

`Somebody else in hospital. Dear, dear.'

'So he says he's going on his own to Paris. The school trip, you remember. I told him you were having your supper and that I'd pass on the message.'

'He can't go on his own,' said Woolson. 'There are girls in that party. There must be a woman to look after the girls.'

`Eat your supper, now. It's nothing to get agitated about, surely.'

'No.' He returned to the fish-pie. 'But somebody will have to go with him. I know. Mrs Connor. Mrs Connor isn't going anywhere for Easter. I'll ring her up first thing in the morning.'

`Mrs Connor?' Alice stared at him. 'Not Mrs Connor. That would be very unwise, wouldn't it? After all the talk, I mean. That would cause a lot of scandal.'

`Did Howarth say what the trouble is? With his wife, I mean?'

'No, he didn't. Surely you can't seriously be thinking of letting those two go together? To Paris, as well.'

`Let people talk if they want to. There's nothing between Howarth and Mrs Connor, nothing at all. I have Howarth's word for that. Just a lot of nasty malicious gossip.'

`There's no smoke without...'

'Nonsense. I trust Howarth. I trust both of them. I trust my staff. If Mrs Connor wants to go, she shall go. I've had

enough,' said Woolton, laying down his knife and fork. 'It was delicious, but I've had enough.'

'I'll come in tomorrow and warm it up for your lunch, shall I?'

'No, there's no need. I can do that myself. I'm not completely helpless.' She looked hurt. 'Sorry,' he said. 'What I meant was that you mustn't give yourself all this trouble.'

`It's no trouble at all. It's a pleasure. But I still think you're unwise...'

'Never mind what you think. It's a token of my trust. Mrs Connor shall take Mrs Howarth's place.'

`I'll bring in the stewed prunes,' said Alice. Secretary melted completely into little woman. 'You do whatever you think fit,' she said meekly. 'After all, you're the head of the house.' She simpered and then went into the kitchen.

THREE

One

SYKES and Cowie and Rich, Doris Burman and Elsie Godwin and Marlene Hicks and Julie Townsend, Dale and Lees and Mimms and Mary Streatham, Edwina Vince and the shadowy others in the background stood at last open-mouthed in the Gare St Lazare. They were in Paris. Somehow or other they had made it. It had not seemed likely on the tossing Channel when, leaning on the taffrail, they had thrown brown chocolate and saffron dough to the bilious sleeve of sea. On the hard seats of the train many had, though a successful landing in France had been achieved, desired death. Now they were in Paris. The people were much like the people in their own school town, except that there were blue-clad porters and police with postmen's hats. Where were the bellied priests and bearded painters and special elegant thin women? It was not very English, though, if you looked up at the posters. These shouted DUBONNET, BYRRH, CINZANO, PERNOD. But little Doris Burman called 'Look' with relief at a whiff of the familiar. COCA-COLA. The world has grown grey with thy breath.

It was seen now that Mr Howarth was not really a fool. The language he taught when he was not teaching German, this clearly had some value, for he hurled and fluted it at a hatchet-faced copper, and this copper understood and nodded. 'We'll take the Metro,' said Mr Howarth. 'I thought someone was coming to meet us, but it doesn't matter. The hotel, if you can call it that, is near Metro Invalides, Rue de Varenne. This way.'

They split into three sections, one of them in the charge

of the prefect Sykes, a fat boy with intellectual pretensions. Bewildered by the strange notices, place-names like those of planet fiction, the pushing, crying and garlic-laden air, the children rumbled on the train towards where they were going. The men and women they saw incredibly seemed to carry on lives of their own, rational and important to themselves, though unreal to the children as the economy of ant-hills or Venusians. They changed at the second stop from Route 12 to Route 8, the whole lumbering lot of them, clumsy and big as an army, and they emerged at last into plain air at the Invalides station. Rain fell and gurgled with *grasseyant* trills down the gutters, launching to the sewers orange-skins, torn Gauloise packages and fragments of French newspaper.

`We could,' said Mrs Connor, 'have gone on to the Varenne station.'

`They can see the Eiffel Tower more clearly from here,' said Howarth. 'That's what they've been waiting for.' They looked up, their open mouths swallowing French rain. For the fiftieth time Howarth counted them. The vulgar seven thousand tons dove its thousand feet of metal into the weeping air, four-square piers of masonry lion-clawing it into deep ground. It soared, clanging poetry, a wonder, proclaiming the Victorian optimism of its engineer. Young Dale was comforted, having seen something like it before in his native North.

The little hotel smelt French — garlic, coffee, cockroaches — and its wallpaper was satisfyingly hideous. The proprietress, heavy-black-bosomed with a glistening moustache and filaments of grey beard, specialised in the accommodation of school parties. Three children to a room on truckle beds. For the lady and gentleman there was a double room, she had understood that the lady and gentleman were married.

`We're not married,' said Howarth. 'My wife was to have come, but . .

`Madame is not monsieur's wife?' The proprietress cast miss-nothing eyes on Hilda's wedding-ring.

`It's a long story,' said Howarth. 'Madame is a colleague, you understand, an instructress. She is to be responsible for the girls of the party.'

`Mong maree,' explained Hilda, 'eh dawn larmay.'

'I understand. Monsieur and madame will require separate rooms. Dinner is served at seven. You have eaten *en route?'*

The children grumbled among themselves, expecting *a* high tea at any moment. Their tough young stomachs had healed with animal swiftness and, many of them having voided completely on the boat, hunger growled like an illness.

`You can go out,' said Howarth, 'as soon as you've unpacked your bags and tidied yourselves up. You, Mimms, look ghastly. Remember you're an ambassador for your country, and Englishmen have the reputation of being the best-dressed men in the world. Don't get lost, try and speak French, and behave yourselves properly. England will be judged by your conduct. You have a tremendous responsibility.'

The children climbed the stairs, chattering in a tongue that was already beginning to sound foreign to Howarth, and he and Hilda followed. He paused on the first landing, looking out of its window at a Paris back-street. The rain fell steadily out of the iron-heavy sky; a soaked cat crawled on a wall; a young girl shook a mat, singing mournfully. In the near distance the Hotel des Invalides; beyond, the flying metal of the Eiffel Tower; beyond again, the river.

`I'm going to lie down,' said Hilda. 'I take it you'll sort out tomorrow's arrangements.'

Howarth looked at her with little favour. A pretty girl, a

pretty provincial girl, decently dressed. 'They should be sending somebody round. Tomorrow the dear children should be seeing, according to the official programme, Notre-Dame, the Tuileries, the Louvre, and God knows what else. I doubt if I shall be joining them.'

`Oh, Chris.'

`I've seen them all before. I lived here for a year, you know, when I was at the Sorbonne. And there's something in the air that's making me feel very irresponsible.'

`Oh, Chris.'

'Oh Chris yourself.' He went to the room the proprietress had allotted him. It was coldly utilitarian with its cheap musty wardrobe and narrow bed. He lay down, inhaling the strong rank fume of a Gauloise. In twos and threes the children, excited and hungry, clattered off. He thought: The teeming life of a great pleasure-loving city goes on around me and here I am at the heart of it. At home, in hospital, my wife lies ill; I have been reconsidering the prospect of an affair with a moderately personable but not very intelligent provincial schoolmistress; I have unleashed twenty-five ignorant schoolchildren on the city, and perhaps some of them have already been run over, some drowned in the Seine, some of them are perhaps even trying to get drunk To hell with everybody and everything. In my wallet I have twelve thousand francs, in my pocket perhaps five hundred in small change. Tonight is mine. Tonight I shall soak myself in Pernod. I may fight, may be stabbed, may be arrested. I don't care. My life is my own. I shall now sleep for an hour.'

He stubbed out the fat loose cigarette and turned over. In his sleep the rain cleared, and, against his waking, the city prepared lemon sunlight, sinking shyly westward, ready to warm her streets with lights for his evening, bid him welcome to her music and rivers of booze.

For dinner they had thick soup, crushed potato running sluggishly off the spoon; they had a piece of dry over-fried sole; they had thin hot beefsteaks with chipped potatoes; they ended with nuts of gorgonzola. The children had all returned safely and, like many a mature traveller, they counted over their torn notes with puzzled frowns, surprised that so many francs should have gone so quickly. Rich seemed to Howarth to be slightly drunk. Some of them clamoured for evening entertainment, but Howarth said sternly:

`You have a busy day ahead of you tomorrow so I want you all to go to bed early. I don't want anybody to stir out of here tonight. There are plenty of things to do. Look, there are maps, there are books, there are magazines.'

'They're all in French, sir.'

`How terribly unjust,' said Howarth. 'How wrong that the French should be permitted to have a language other than English. I shall speak to the Government about it.'

Rich said: `Sarky,' and then hiccoughed. Howarth ignored that. Hilda said:

`And what do you propose to do?' She looked very smart in her black costume with its frothy white jabot, eager too. But the wide civilised air pulsing all around diminished her desirability more than Howarth could have thought possible. Another time, perhaps; tonight *was* for him alone.

'I've got to go out,' said Howarth, 'and meet an old friend. A friend from my Sorbonne days.' He was not lying. 'Monsieur Pernod Fils,' he explained. She took that without a murmur, the silly provincial girl. She said:

'Oh. Well, I suppose I'd better stay here and look after the children.'

`Yes, you do that. You stay home and look after the children.' She mounted the stairs, quite callipygous but, in this callipygous city, not callipygous enough. Another time.

He finished up his half-bottle of red wine and sighed with pleasure as he looked at the drying April street, plum-luscious night coming down.

Raincoated he walked dawn the Rue du Bac, into the Boulevard St Germain, the region he knew best, inhaling the delicious air, his ears drumming to the corncorncorning of the impatient autos. He knew that he would not be taken for an Englishman, that his French accent was perfect, that his knowledge of *argot — much* of it gained from French translations of American shockers — was formidable. He was going to be somebody else now, just for this evening.

He drank his first two glasses in a cafe where capped and jerseyed workmen extended shrugging arms in a rapid discussion about wages, machine-gunning vocables to end in brief dead resigned silences. There was also the question of Pierre's wife and her infidelity. Life was like that and a man had to be a philosopher. Howarth moved on to a cafe where billiard-balls clacked and an accordion on the radio wheezed a fast waltz. It was free at this time of the year from the barking contention of students, their shoulders cloaked with overcoats. He was given Penrod by a fat desirable girl with a sweet broken smile. He felt the familiar lapping of the incoming tide of euphoria.

He passed on, bolder and happier, to a villainous dirty café where a grey-dirty-haired, slip-slop-slippered, money-bag-breasted woman croaked sharp bird-words to a half-seen slut in the back room. Howarth could see the slut binding her hair, thin bare arms weaving and weaving on the dark big bed of the living quarters. It was such things one remembered in old age, God knew why. He drank cognac, feeling, after the seductive aniseed taste, the need for burning his gullet, the delectable sharp honeyed fire to blaze like a comet down and down. He smiled at the ugly huge-hipped harridan who sat at a narrow table with her sullen

fancy man, he scolding in fast quiet gutturals. She smiled back with a tooth or two He gripped her arm urgently, darting a look of small venom at Howarth. Howarth had another chalice of cognac. He began to talk rapid sesquipedalian theology to Madame, who said, without interest but politely: *`C'est vrai, monsieur.'*

He moved on. Gare Montparnasse, Boulevard Edgar Quinet, the horrible oblong cemetery. The Rotonde, the Dome, the Coupole. He found a small seedy cafe where a few seedy painters discussed the movements they had just caught up with. Young men with crew-cuts talked about jazz, and one of them fingered a guitar, a cigarette in his bobbing lips, striking in first position, over and over, the chord of Re and the chord of La. At a table alone were smoke-puffing girls with coffee before them; each looked into space, lipping laconic comments. At the bar a thin man with a dark mask hiding a blown-off chin monotoned in words that Howarth could not understand. Let life begin, he said to himself, let the great adventure loom up out of one of those bottles. He had to change another thousand-franc note. His pockets were heavy with coins he could not be troubled to count.

The bar he next entered was, to his delight, bright, warm and cosmopolitan. He felt an immense desire to talk languages. A hidden radio sang and coloured lights danced over the bar. Ordering his Penrod, he heard choice Italian talked next to him and had to join in. An unshaven man and his fat wife, both from Tuscany. To the empty face of the high mirror behind the bar he intoned the gibberish of Pluto in the *Inferno:*

`Pepe Satan ! Pepe Satan ! Aleppe !'

`I've been trying to place you,' said the American. 'It was in the war, of course.' He had wrinkled brown eyes under a trilby, a long nose and a bifurcated moustache. He leaned

loosely, a whisky-soda before him, on the counter. 'They say you meet everybody in Paris,' he said. 'Were you in Germany, late in the war? Does the name Muller mean anything to you, Captain Muller?'

Howarth tried to focus. 'Germany? Where in Germany?'

`The Rhine. Some place along the Rhine I can't remember the names of the darned places.'

`There was a party,' said Howarth. 'Champagne from some schloss or other. A jeep drove itself into the river and nobody seemed to miss it. Was that you?'

`That might have happened. I can't remember. I was thinking of the black market. I could swear it was somebody like you who was brought in to interpret. Cigarettes or something. I guess it just wasn't as important as it seemed then. I can't remember.'

`My name's Howarth. Captain Howarth, Intelligence Corps.'

`That figures. I was with the Military Police.'

`*Annoncez la couleur,'* said Howarth. *'C'est moi qui rince.'*

`The same again,' said the American. 'You live in Paris?'

`No. I'm a schoolmaster with a gang of urchins over here for a —' (he belched quietly) educational visit.'

`So you're down to that, a male schoolmarm.'

`They tell us it's a highly honourable profession. The trouble is, it doesn't pay very well. What are you doing, anyway?'

`I'm in wines. In Italy. Started with a small vineyard just after the war. Not doing too badly now. I've found a good local wine that travels. Least, I found how to make it travel. It's exporting pretty brisk. It's a good wine, sort of full-bodied Chianti, a bit sweeter than the usual. Anyway, I get around, selling it.'

`So you didn't go back home?'

`Brother, I did. I got out again pretty fast. They didn't

seem to know there'd been a war on. Besides, I need something more than a climate.'

`A climate?' Howarth drank from his glass of cloudy Penrod and a thorn of ice hit a tooth like a tuning-fork.

`That's what I said. America's an abstraction, the way I see it. It's lost blood so fast it's only an idea now. I got so I couldn't taste anything any more. It was all two dimensions and everything deep-frozen. Russia and China and a bit of clear thought scaring the pants off everybody. So I bad to come back to Europe.'

`Like Henry James and Eliot and the rest of them.'

`Things may be cracking up over here, but there's still a taste to things, things still taste pretty good. Some things taste better when they're on the turn, I guess. Anyway, I found I couldn't be a Catholic over there.'

`Of course, I remember now. We had a big argument one evening over the Immaculate Conception or something. And then the jeep went into the river.'

`That's right. Well, you should know that Catholicism's not just a religion, it's a way of life. You want to be in the middle of life to be a Catholic. You need dirt and disease and smells. You need just what America can't give. You don't want chlorophyll and wrapped food and under-arm depilatories. You want a particular kind of sun and the old phallic dances and a bit of wailing to a guitar. America's too darn clean. It's aseptic. I'd gotten to the stage of believing that when you got to the top of a girl's legs you'd find just nothing there. You have one with me now.'

'Penrod.'

`Right. So I'm in Italy now with a guy called, of all names, Vespucci, in the wine business. I'll give you my card.' He gave it. Howarth read it solemnly, swaying slightly. He put it with great care in his wallet. He said:

`You know the legend of Theseus and the Minotaur? I

always think of Theseus as the American superman, you know, tough and clean and football-playing. The Minotaur is original sin. The Labyrinth is civilisation. If you kill the Minotaur the Labyrinth falls down.'

`Look,' said Muller, 'you'd better come over and see this vineyard sometime. I'm going back myself day after tomorrow. You come with me then and take a look at it.'

`I can't,' said Howarth. 'There are all these children, you see. But I'll take a rain check on that ..

`That's American talk, that rain check stuff,' said Muller disapprovingly. 'Listen, do you need a job? You speak languages pretty well, don't you?'

`I know a few, four or five.'

`Do you think you could stand coming over to help in the wine business? Vespucci's all right, but he's kind of limited. Vespucci stays put there. But we need somebody to help manage the export side of the business and travel round a bit. There's no security, of course. We may smash up tomorrow. I guess I'm taking a bit of a chance in putting this proposition. Think it over. Find your own way. You married?'

`Yes. I always was. But you wouldn't remember.'

`I'm not. I take what I can where I can. Like tonight. I got to be going. Have one before I go.'

`Pernod, please,' said Howarth. 'That,' he said, 'is not quite the mark of the devout Catholic, is it?'

`Hell, I'm not a *good* Catholic. Goodness and badness don't count, the way I see it. It's what you believe that matters.'

`And how about the fires of hell?'

Brother, hell is one aspect of ultimate reality. Ultimate reality, whatever it's like, is bound to be more significant than this sort of earth-life.' He raised and swung a hand to indicate the drinkers, chatterers, whisperers in women's ears.

`Anyway, God will forgive it. Augustine's a saint, and he prayed to make him pure but not yet.'

`Cheers.'

`Cheeahs; said Muller in a mock-English voice. They raised glasses, Muller draining his. 'Now I've got to meet her,' he said. 'A bit of unoriginal sin. Think that over, feller. Don't lose my card. So long. We had some darned good times in Germany.'

He was away. Howarth drank, thought, looked again at Muller's card, thought again, in a sort of haze, a drink-cocoon, put the card away once more, thought, drank.

Meanwhile Rich and Cowie were meeting adventure. They had waited till most of their schoolmates had gone to bed and then, creeping out, satisfied that the prefect Sykes was asleep and Mrs Connor apparently in the bathroom, had returned to a place which had much intrigued them that afternoon. It was an amusement arcade, bright, glaring, sweating. So far they had felt things rather unjust: foreigners were to be despised or derided, and in Paris they themselves had become foreigners. But the pin-tables, ball-games, slot-machines and perpetual American gramophone records that zoomed larger than life from loudspeakers, the gangs of rough youth — these made a world which they knew and understood, the familiar holiday world. The machines, too, were all concerned with numbers, and numbers were an international language, a kind of English.

Rich and Cowie noted with interest a number of hip-swaying pretty boys who talked with much petulant sibilance, smiling and ogling certain quite well-dressed men who entered singly at intervals, seemingly uninterested in the click and roll of the game-machines Sometimes a man and a youth would go out together. Perhaps, thought Rich, they went out to bigger and better amusement arcades. He did not think of this for long, becoming more and more

engrossed in contending with Cowie for the highest flashed number in a switch-flick game, ball-bearings into holes past metal electric-crackling obstacles.

'I won that time,' he said. 'You pay for the next game.' They ate toothsome sweets like pebbles and coughed over a Highlife cigarette. They became aware soon of two men watching their game. One was moustached, puce-faced and dressed in a chocolate-coloured overcoat; the other wore long sideboards and black scurfed hair curled over his big ears.

`You are English boys,' said the overcoated man. He spoke with a slight American accent. 'You are in Paris for the first time?'

`Yes,' said Rich, flicking his ball up the slope of the table.

`Would you like to visit other places?' Both men smiled, quite nice and friendly, as it seemed to Rich and Cowie.

`Places where they've got more of these things?' said Rich. `I don't mind. But we haven't got much money.' Spoken in Rich's provincial accent, this *was* not easy going for the two men, but they caught the word 'money'.

'Yes,' said the man with sideboards. 'Money.'

`I don't like the look of them,' said Cowie out of the side of his mouth. He was a thin, scared-looking, bloodless sort of boy, younger than Rich. Rich said:

`You want to see a bit of life, don't you? You don't want to go back home and say you've just seen them frog R.C. churches and nothing else, do you? Where's your sense of adventure?'

`I could do with something to drink,' said Cowie.

'They'll give us a drink, won't you?' said Rich to the two men. The two men indicated that they would be only too pleased to. And so they went off, the four of them, the boys helped through the crowds with a steering arm or a friendly pat on the bottom. An educational visit.

Howarth could hardly believe his eyes when two of his

party entered the bar off the Rue Oudinot, two men with them. A boy for a man. Rich saw, with some dismay, Mr Bloody Howarth, tight as an owl, at the counter, and both saw that they saw each other. 'You,' said Howarth, walking with great steadiness over. 'You should not be here. Nor,' he said, with glassy sternness, to Cowie, 'should you. You have both disobeyed orders.'

The two pederasts looked insolently at Howarth. Each held on to his little friend. Let this one get his own. *`Cest pas votre affaire,'* said the man in the overcoat.

'It is,' said Howarth, 'very much my business. These two are my pupils.' The whole bar regarded the pretty scene, interested. Howarth spoke to Cowie and Rich. 'Get out. Go on, run. Make a dash for it. You're in danger.'

Cowie stared stupidly. Rich, however, was in an A-stream. 'Scream,' he said. `Go on, scream.' Cowie let out a girl's scream. Startled, the sideboarded man loosed his arm. Cowie rushed for the door. Rich struggled, whimpering. 'Let him go,' ordered Howarth. Rich bit the fleshy part of the hand of the moustached man. The moustached man cried *'Merck,'* sucking the pain. Rich was off, scared out of his wits.

He and Cowie, outside in the blue air, breathing fast, looked at each other. 'They'll beat him up,' panted Rich. We ought to call the coppers.'

`We'd better run like hell,' said Cowie. 'Kidnappers, that's what they are. After ransom. And my dad wouldn't have the money. This is the way, down here.' They ran, blue devils at their heels.

Back at the hotel, they waited, breathless, in their bedroom. Little Dale, who shared it with them, slept innocently. 'They might have knifed him,' suggested Cowie with relish. Soon they heard unsteady footsteps and loud laughter, both coming up the stairs. 'It's him,' whispered Rich. 'Laughing his bleeding head off.' It was. Howarth opened their door.

His hair was all over his eyes and blood dripped and clotted under his nostrils, making a plastic moustache. He gazed at the two of them, laughing loud. That was the Pernod: it made everything seem funny. Little Dale woke up, his pale eyes startled. 'You,' said Howarth. He roared aloud with big-lunged laughter. It was so bloody funny. 'You should.' More shouting mirth. Distant sleepers began to stir. 'You should not have been.' Oh, God. His ribs ached, as though caving in. He sat down on Dale's bed, tears streaming in an agony of laughter. Dale began to cry. Soon the paroxysm passed. 'There, there,' he said, patting Dale like a dog. `We'll say no more about it,' promised Howarth, gazing on Rich and Cowie who, old-spinster-like, had drawn the bedclothes up to their chins. His mouth began to spread again with mounting laughter. He checked himself: down, wantons, down. He thought of sad things — Veronica in hospital, his lack of money. He cried aloud again. It was so bloody funny. Again he calmed himself.

`Tomorrow night,' he said at last, 'we shall spend a nice edifying evening at the theatre. Racine.' He roared. 'Racine.' He was weak with tears and great shouts. 'Or Corneille.' The joke was too much. He nearly collapsed. At length he stood at the door, weak but quiet and grave again. 'We'll say no more about it,' he said. 'Good night, and be more careful next time.' He went out, and they heard him trying a locked door. His laughter rose again like a wind, blowing itself out in his own bedroom.

`It wasn't so funny,' said Cowie. 'We might have been tortured and had our fingers cut off and sent home. Holding out for ransom. And my dad wouldn't be able to pay it.'

'He should have looked after us better,' said Rich. 'He shouldn't have let us go out like that. He's got no sense of responsibility.'

Two

VERONICA lay in bed in a private ward that, though she was not a private patient, Leary had fiddled for her in the fiddling way of the town. She lay in utter solitude in the early evening, with leisure to roll around her mind the significance of what the specialist had told her.

Mr Godkin, a pleasant, fat, frank little man, had cleaned his spectacles vigorously with a piece of tissue-paper, gazing unseeingly but benevolently at Veronica. Then, becoming sharp-sighted again, he had, in his sharp way, told her that she was obviously an intelligent woman, and that he always believed in placing before his more intelligent patients the full facts of the case. He gave her an anatomical lesson, describing the uterus, naming its parts, rolling the special terms with love round his tongue. After a general disquisition on the curious ailments to which the organ was subject, he came to rest at the word 'displacement'. He spiralled down from displacement as a general text-book impersonal condition to her displacement, the displacement of her uterus. But the terms were still lovingly remote, flashing through the ward air like silverfish flashing on the hearth. Retroversion, retroflexion, anteflexion, suspected visceroptosis, congenital weakness of the ligaments. It seemed — and he demonstrated with a rubber ball he had picked up in the day-room of one of the children's wards — that the top of the organ had become indented, it had thrust itself into the

cavity, and the uterus had in fact become inverted. This explained the hxmorrhage, he said.

Now. He had become grave, but combined gravity with an infinite cheerfulness that gleamed from his glasses. He had thought it might be possible to push back the inverted portion, but he foresaw many difficulties. The uterus, he implied, was not a very good uterus. It was weak, not fit for its biological job. It ought to be removed. Hysterectomy. He liked the sound of the word. Hysterectomy. It was a safe operation, nothing to worry about at all.

He could not operate until he had obtained the husband's permission. Her husband was abroad? On business? They would have to wait for his return. Mr Godkin emphasised that removal of the uterus would in no wise necessitate the cessation of normal marital relations. He had, in fact, frequently observed that the sexual happiness of both parties had been actively promoted by the freedom from anxiety occasioned by the removal of the ever-present fear of unwanted impregnation which even the most careful use of contraceptive devices had been unable to dispel. A physiological loss meant a psychological, nay a psychosomatic, gain.

Veronica lay, looking at the white ceiling. Spring chattered outside. This was Holy Week. The earth was coming back to life, and all over the northern world the spring-gods shook their terrible corn-locks. Christopher, now in Paris, being, she hoped, good, Christopher believed in Christ, so he said, as he believed in Thammuz, Adonis, an incarnation of returning life. The invisible gigantic wrestling in the heavens, and then the triumphant banners of the Easter hero. He was leaves, grain, mating of animals, the fruitful womb. Was there, she puzzled in her sleepy state, some god of hysterectomy?

What, she wondered, was the doctrinal position as regards

what Mr Godkin had said? She remembered the words of a Catholic Truth Society pamphlet she had once read: 'Sexual pleasure in the married state is a good and holy thing, for it is directed to the procreation of souls to people God's kingdom.' And also, of course, the other kingdom. But she could remember the time, before the birth of Peter, when it had seemed a good in itself, somehow sacramental. She must ask Canon Moan. Somehow she could already hear Canon Moon commiserating about her becoming biologically useless. As though that was all life was for 1 There stirred in her something she had hardly before had time to conceive: that the Church was a man's Church, that it was unfair to women. Virginity and maternity were the only two desirable states for a woman, so the Church seemed to say; the Church saw woman as an instrument, not a soul in her own right.

Veronica sighed and lit a cigarette. She was allowed to smoke; Leary had even provided her with a fifty box of Player's. Not a very good uterus, Mr Godkin had said. Those are not very good stockings, that is not a very good perfume, this is not very good quality cloth. Nothing was very good. Well, by God or by somebody, things had better start being a bit better. She was in her middle thirties; life mustn't continue to pass her by like, she thought, like some private cinema performance in a rich man's house. She basked for a moment in a voluptuous vision of being involved in a bank robbery, rushing off with the loot, Christopher at the wheel. Canon Moon wouldn't like that, would he? The hotel in the South of France, sun-glasses, her elegant limbs ending in ridiculously expensive sandals. The cocktail hour, the hand-kissing swarthy gigolos. Even Mme Pecriaux's proving more complaisant to Christopher's advances — that was part of the dream of wealth. Blessed are the poor . . . But the humble and the peace-makers had the same inheritance, and she

would not mind being rich, pacific and meek.

As castration automatically unfrocked a priest (unfrocked: what a ridiculous word), so perhaps hysterectomy, or the prospect of it, loosened a woman's faith. Religion and fertility. It all tied up. The next time she saw Canon Moon .. .

There was a knock at the door. 'Come in,' she said, thinking it would be Leary. But it was Woolton who shyly entered. Woolton, ill-combed, ill-shaven, his clothes creased in the wrong places, his tie grubby.

'I thought,' he said, 'I'd come and see you. I haven't been able to before, but my wife, you see, has been moved to Ratley Hospital and my mother, well, my mother . .

'This is very kind of you,' said Veronica. 'Do sit down. How is your mother?'

'It won't be long now,' said Woolton, sitting. 'She doesn't seem to recognise me any more. A couple of days at the most, that's what they say.'

'I'm sorry.'

'There's no need to be sorry. She'd had her life, a good long one. A happy life,' said Woolton. 'She's lived through three wars,' he added, as though this best exemplified her happiness. 'And how are you?' he asked. 'When are they going to let you out?'

`The specialist wants me to have an operation, but we'll have to wait till Christopher gets back.'

'Have you heard from him?'

`He sent me this postcard.' Veronica showed a glossy picture of the Arc de Triomphe. 'I don't know what particular triumph of his own this is meant to celebrate . .

`It was a great pity you couldn't go,' said Woolton. 'Still, we were lucky that Mrs Connor was willing to stand in for you. There has to be somebody, you see, to look after the girls.'

'Oh,' said Veronica. 'Oh. I didn't realise that Mrs Connor . . . Chris never mentioned it.'

`Your husband didn't know,' said Woolton brightly. 'I wasn't able to contact him till he was actually at the station. And Mrs Connor herself nearly missed the train.'

`Oh.'

`But she was so keen to go,' said Woolton, 'and there had to be somebody, you see. I must admit that your husband looked a little taken aback when I told him and when she actually arrived . . . Still, I dare say everything will be all right. I believe in these trips abroad. It broadens the outlook of the children so much, you know, this contact with other countries.'

`So Mrs Connor was anxious to go, was she?'

'Oh, quite anxious. She lives rather a dull life, I believe, with her husband away in the army. She seemed to welcome the chance to get over to Paris.'

'I see.'

'Well,' said Woolton, 'I must Ind out about times of buses to Ratley. Ratley's more of a convalescent home than a hospital, you know. It's a lovely place, I believe.'

`And how is Mrs Woolton?' asked Veronica, her mind nearly wholly occupied with snapshots of Christopher and Mrs Connor together on the familiar boulevards.

`She's going to be all right,' said Woolton. 'That's what they say. A slight mental disturbance, you know. But she's going to be all right, and I must confess that she looked a lot better when I saw her *last.* You get better, too, my dear,' he said, patting the bed vaguely. 'You get fit again and out of this hospital. Then perhaps we can see more of you at the School functions.'

'Does it?' said Veronica distractedly. 'Oh, I see. Yes, Mr Woolton, thank you. And my regards to your, to your .

`Yes, yes.' And Woolton, twiddling his fingers at her as

though she were something in a cage, left.

Well, thought Veronica. So that woman, not content with her car, wardrobe, and major husband, wanted Christopher as well, did she? Poor Christopher. Poor weak Christopher, unable to say no to any woman. That Mme Pecriaux, for instance. You could see the predatory look in her eye. Things would be different, Veronica vowed, when she was better and out of here. There were arts no woman should allow to fall into desuetude, the arts of keeping one's husband. Let her only get out of here, that was all. She felt better already.

Howarth and Hilda Connor were sitting drinking in a bistro off the Rue de la Paix. `I am sitting,' said Howarth to himself, 'in a bistro off the Rue de la Paix.' That was a cliche for popular novels. But, damn it all, there *was* a Rue de la Paix and he was sitting in a bistro just off it.

`A penny for your thoughts,' said Hilda. She was smart as ever, in green today. She had already taken two Pernods and was ready for a third. The children were, all merciful morning, in the hands of a guide who was showing them the treasures of the Louvre. Rich and Cowie would appreciate those, they really would. Howarth said:

What I was thinking was: here we are drinking in a bistro off the Rue de la Paix.'

`Yes. Thrilling, isn't it?' Howarth looked at her warily. `That girl,' said Hilda, 'is a pretty girl, isn't she? But I don't think Frenchwomen generally are as pretty as they're cracked up to be. Or as smart. Do you, Chris?'

`Oh, they're all right,' said Howarth.

`What's come over you lately?' asked Hilda. She moved closer to him. 'You've become so . . . so distant, somehow.'

`Let's have another drink, shall we?' said Howarth. He signalled for two more of the same again. 'I didn't notice,' he said, 'that I'd particularly changed. I suppose I'm a bit worried about Veronica, that's all. I thought Leary might have let me know what's happening with her. He could have got the address from her, after all. I don't like being kept in the dark.'

`Oh, yes, Veronica,' she said with some impatience. `So this worry about Veronica means that it's all over, does it? All over before,' she smiled, 'it's even started?'

Howarth smiled back, waterily. 'I've tried,' he said, `to be a bit more prudent. And, perhaps, a bit more loyal. I saw that it couldn't work. I saw it even as I was saying what I was saying.'

'I see,' said Hilda. 'Your Catholicism triumphs again. I call it . . . Well, you know what I call it. There must be a special name for that sort of cowardice.'

`Cowardice?' repeated Howarth. 'It's cowardice not to want to break up a marriage? I shouldn't call it that. I meant what I said,' he continued. 'Every word. But I don't want to mess things up for you, for me, for Veronica . .

`Why should there be any question of messing things up? The trouble with you, Chris, is that you have some sort of delusion about the Soul. You think the Soul exists. All right, all right, it may, for all I know. But you don't seem able to acknowledge that some things can get on very nicely without having to bring the Soul into them. Because you want to sleep with me you don't have to swear eternal love and devotion, you know.'

There were complicated changes in Howarth's veins, arteries, glands. 'It's not as simple as that,' he said.

`What isn't?'

`Well,' said Howarth, and for the life of him he couldn't think why it wasn't as simple as that. There was the question

of sin, of course. Today was Holy Saturday and, according to the promise he had made his wife and his son, he should be going to have his pan scraped this afternoon, turning his clumsy Saxon sins into delicate French *peches.* It would be inadvisable, it would be downright cynical to indulge in adultery, say, after lunch and then, repenting it all rapidly (which he quite certainly would: he had no doubt at all about that) rush off and confess it. It would, in a sense, be most ungentlemanly. He couldn't, of course, explain all that to Hilda; it would, moreover, be a deadly insult to tell her that he wouldn't sleep with her, thank you very much, because it was a sin. No Frenchman, surely, would behave like that; and France was, after all, still a Catholic country.

`Well,' he repeated. 'There's the question of all these knowing little brats, surrounding us all the time, watching us like scatophagous hawks.'

`What kind of hawks?'

`Scatophagous.'

`I must look that up sometime. I can't understand you, Chris, quite apart from your vocabulary. I throw the big chance in your way and you start mumbling about what the dear little children are going to think about it. You didn't have any such scruples that day in the dining-hall. For my part, I don't give a damn what they think I'm leaving next term, anyway.'

`Leaving?'

`Yes, didn't I tell you? Oh, well, Sweetypie's being posted to Gibraltar, First Fortress Company. Thrilling, isn't it? I don't have to give a whole term's notice, because being a soldier's wife etcetera, etcetera. What I mean is, the army doesn't give Sweetypie a term's notice before they post him.'

`Quite. So,' said Howarth, having sipped his Pernod, 'we shan't be seeing so much of each other.'

`Don't talk wet. We shan't be seeing *oanything* of each other.'

`No. That's true.' The old Minnesinger twanged his lute. `It's as well, I suppose. I shan't be tormented any more by the sight of you in the staff-room, in the corridors, unattainable, beautiful and unattainable.'

`Tormented my foot. I honestly think you want me to be unattainable. You want to turn me into a sort of Virgin Mary. Well, I'm not that type at all.'

Howarth tried, for three seconds, to imagine what type the Virgin Mary was, and then said: 'You can't ever be mine, that's what so tormenting. We can never be really together.'

`Oh, yes, we can,' said Hilda, 'if you really want it. We could be together now, in bed, if you really cared enough about it, instead of mooning in this insipid Catholic romantic way of yours. We could be together tonight.'

That was true. While the children snored their little heads off. 'Or,' said Howarth, 'even this afternoon.'

`And how about the brats?'

`Sykes can take them for a walk. These prefects ought to be given a certain amount of responsibility. It's good for their souls.'

`Souls. There you go again.'

`All right. We'd better have some more Pernod.'

And, ordering it, he knew that tomorrow morning the chimes of Saint-Eustache, the Madeleine, Saint-Joseph, Saint-Pierre-de-Chaillot, Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, Saint-Gervais, Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, Saint-Severin, Saint-Etienne-du-Mont, Saint-Pierre-de-Montmartre, Val-de-Grace and Saint-Sulpice would shatter the air and hum in vain for him. While, it being Easter Day, the sun danced.

Three

THE EASTER bells clashed all over England, clashed, throbbed, splintered the sober English air as the cool morning moved slowly to noon. St Henry's, St Edward's, St Elizabeth's, St Arius's, St Pelagius's, and the tiny tinny triangles of tin tabernacles of ten or more different sects tintinnabulated. The sundered particles of the heavenly body miraculously fused and rose in the east and mounted the east as one flesh.

Wootton sat with his wife in the solarium of the hospital at Ratley. She was a lot better. She looked more like a young woman approaching middle age humorously and with grace, more like that than like a middle-aged woman growing raggedly and crossly old. Her speech was less slack and regional: the consonants clicked like a belt, the vowels were polished like leather. She was more alert, more reasonable. She said:

`I've got to keep a hold on myself. But it's something that I'm able to keep a hold on myself. What I mean is that I still tend to get all weepy and hysterical, but I feel I can tell myself to stop. I'm a great deal better.'

`Oh, yes, you are. I can see that,' said Wootton. He took her hand. 'Well,' he said, 'you'll be coming back to a very different house. A house without mother.'

She said nothing for a moment. Then she said: 'I know it sounds callous, but I can't say I'm sorry. I can't say that she's been very much help. Oh, I know she's cooked a few meals and dusted the ornaments, but I mean . . . Well, you know what I mean, really. It's easier to be your wife

when I don't have somebody breathing over my shoulder all the time, seeing what sort of a job I'm making of it.'

`She's had a long life,' said Wootton, 'and a happy life. She's lived through three wars. I don't have any regrets about it. It will be good, it will really, when there are just the two of us again.'

`And if it's going to be a new start,' she said, `I'm going to try and make new friends. And one friend I'm going to drop is Alice. Not,' she said, 'that Alice has ever really been a friend.' She shuddered. 'As a matter of fact, it's been rather the opposite. I don't like women friends who have to express their devotion in the way she did. You know all about that, don't you? Any woman who went into your office — any girl, for that matter — Alice would notice and bring the tale straight back to me. She'd say I was a poor, poor girl being married to such a libertine of a husband. I see now that's just something to laugh at. That means I'm definitely getting better.'

`Look,' said Wootton, 'I may have been dense or blind or something, but I honestly didn't know. I knew you had this peculiar obsession about my going about with other women, but I just put that down to . . . Well, so it was Alice all the time, was it? It's actionable, you know, that is. Slander.'

`Oh, she's a bit deranged,' said Frederica Wootton. 'She's the sort of woman who should have got married ages ago. It's too late now, I'd say. The thing to do is not to take any notice.'

But I must take notice. I can't have that sort of thing ...' Wootton thought that he now understood a great deal. Those letters, for instance. 'I must take steps to have her dismissed.'

`Oh, you know that's impossible. She'll outlast you. Make no mistake about it.'

Wootton thought for a moment. 'You know,' he said, 'it may have been wicked and unfilial, but I did have hopes

that when mother died . . . Well, I expected a little, more than a little. She was well provided for, you know, and the money's been well invested. I thought we might get enough to start a small private school somewhere. Somewhere where I could *really* be the boss. But,' he said sadly, 'it looks as though she's been rather malicious about her will. She was talking about cats' homes and so on. And yet the prospect of having to carry on at that place till my retirement .. . Well, it's not really a happy thought, is it?'

'I thought everything was all right now, what with the new building and everything. Are you *really* unhappy there?'

'It's enemies,' said Woolton. 'Oh, I know that sounds melodramatic, but you can't give of your best when you're surrounded by enemies.'

`Fight them,' said Frederica Woolton. 'Make that school into whatever you wish. You *are* the boss, you know, whatever the Governors and the rest of the swine say or do. You *are* the Headmaster.'

`You said they were swine,' said Woolton, in wonderment. `You know, you *must* be getting better.'

'Oh, I am.'

`And you'll be home soon. You know,' he sighed, 'I could do with some of your cooking again. My stomach hasn't been all that good.'

'Poor boy.'

`Good God. Alice.' That was something that would have to stop. Alice the wife-substitute. 'I won't have that bitch in my house,' he said, 'not any more. The absolute and unutterable bitch.'

'She's not a bitch, not really. She's just pitiable, that's all.'

'But I shan't have her in the house again.'

It was not, it proved, so easy to keep her out. Woolton had luncheon in the Dragon and went home to, he hoped, an

afternoon of quiet with the Latin poets. But she came, standing coyly in the doorway, saying:

'How is she? How are they both?' And she gave him a sugared-lemon smile.

Woolton thought: 'Dare I say what I want to say? Dare I risk the falling of the tower of the local burgesses upon me? The utter and absolute bitch.'

'I wondered,' she said, `if you'd like to come to our house for tea. My father and mother would be so pleased to see you again.' Woolton looked on his vision of the cantankerous sunken-jawed old pair, the father, loudly plaintive, tottering around on an irritable stick, the mother bending her shrunken skull to the *Daily Mirror.* He shuddered.

'Thank you, no. And, by the way, there'll be no need for you to come and cook any more meals for me . .

`Oh, but why not? Oh, don't say it like that; it's been a pleasure, really it has.'

`Yes, I appreciate it a great deal, of course, but ..

She smiled. 'You're thinking of the scandal, aren't you?'

`Scandal?'

'Yes. People talk of the most innocent things, don't they?' They were in the dining-room. He had not asked her in; she had, with the ease of long familiarity, just entered it uninvited and now sat on the edge of an armchair, her edge-to-edge coat swinging back to show a mustard-wool frock. `They gossip terribly round here.'

'Yes, yes, I suppose they do.' He sucked his empty pipe, tasting air flavoured with old tobacco-tar. Was now the time for saying it? Or was his wife right?

`They've been saying things about you, haven't they?' said Alice. 'You know they've been saying things, don't you?'

Well.' He paused. She seemed to be suppressing an old maid's excitement. She leaned forward a little, saying:

`You ***haue*** heard?'

The thing gushed up in his throat. 'Well, since you raise the point, and very opportunely, if I may say so, I may say that only this morning my wife said certain things, said that you said certain things. You said certain things to her when she wasn't well, when she was ill.' He glanced at the eager bird-like face, illuminated by the harsh daylight from the window. 'And I want to say this,' he said. 'I want to say that if you've been upsetting her . . .' His voice strengthened. `If you've been putting ideas into her head ..

`Yes?' She betrayed only a sort of interest.

`Then you're a wicked . . . You're a malicious . . .' It sounded so weak. `If you have been . . .' Lame and tame, that's how it sounded.

`Oh.' Alice showed pain. 'Oh, do you honestly think? Do you really believe I could? The two of us so friendly. I have perhaps told her how stupid people are, the things they will say. But if I thought you really believed. Oh. Mr Woolton.'

`I don't know what to think. I know that I trust my wife and that I ..

`But she's been so ill, hasn't she? She didn't know what she was saying half the time, did she?'

`She's not ill now. *And* she knows what she's saying.'

`Yes. Of course. Of course, I haven't been to see her. I've not been able to, have I? I've been cooking your evening meal for you, haven't I? Most evenings, when I could, that is. I suppose now that you say you don't want me to cook for you any more, I suppose I can get down to the hospital and see her.'

`I don't think you'd be particularly welcome.'

`Not welcome? Not welcome? Not welcome to Frederica, my friend?' She got up and stood by the fireplace, under the yellowing photograph of a group of students, Woolton on the back row wearing a moustache and a stiff high collar.

`Oh, if I honestly thought you meant that . . .0h, I do think you believe that I wanted to do harm to her. I think you're accusing ..

`Well . . .' He dreaded the thought of a scene. 'What I was trying to find out was . . . '

`The very suggestion, the very suspicion.' She moved her shoulders as if her back itched. 'And I've always been so fond of you. Both of you.'

`All right, please forget about it.'

`Here was I trying to show how stupid I thought all those mean little stories.'

`What stories?' He stiffened himself for the answer, though he knew what the general answer was. What particularities? What embroideries?

`They say that you've had one of the girls in your office.' Even saying so little, she became grotesquely, girlishly shy. `They say that it can be proved.'

`But, my dear woman, I get the impression that that's the sort of story *you've* been retailing. To my wife, too. I think, before I lose my temper, I'd better ask you to leave.'

She ignored that. It was all written down in a diary,' she said.

`Whose diary?' he asked, in spite of himself.

`This girl's diary.' She looked at the hearth-rug, half-wriggling with a curious sort of shamed pleasure. 'It describes what you did.'

`What I did?'

`What you did with this girl in your office.'

`But this is,' he gasped, 'this is incredible. `I'd no idea. I'd never imagined. It's preposterous. Where is this diary?'

`It's gone now. It was stolen. But all the Governors have seen it. And some of them have spoken to the girl.' She looked at him with a kind of nakedness, as though she were involved vicariously in the shameful act.

'But how did they get hold of it? Who is this girl? Why is she telling these lies? Surely I've a right ..

'The girl was careless. She left it lying about, and then it started circulating.' She was thinking of chain-libraries and herself as a schoolgirl. The tattered books that passed from one red-cheeked pupil to another.

Who is this girl? It's absolutely essential . .

'They don't want you to know her name. They said it wouldn't be fair on the girl.'

'What are you trying to do? What are you all after? How is it that you know all these things, and nobody's even mentioned to me, not a word ..

'I hear talk, you see. I've been living here a long time. I know a lot of these people personally I was at school with a lot of them.'

'It's quite incredible,' he said. The grey hair had become wild, the visible flag of his emotion. 'What are they after?' he repeated. 'What do they want to do?'

'They're disturbed. Some of them want to call a Governors' meeting. They want to ask you about it, you see.'

'Who is this girl? You must know. I have a right, I demand to know. They can't make accusations like that. It's fantastic.'

Slyly, she asked: 'You've no idea who the girl is? You mean to say you really don't know?'

He stared, horrified. 'Why should I know? Do *you* believe that these things are true?' He swallowed a hard lump. 'Whatever,' he added, 'these things are.'

'How do I know that it isn't true?' she said. 'I don't come to your office all that much. How do I know that you don't . .

He advanced on her. She moved back to the mantelpiece. 'So you do believe it,' he said. 'You're capable of it. You're capable of anything. You never liked me, you'd be willing

to credit anything that blackened me ..

`But you're so wrong.' She cringed, as with anticipation of pleasure. 'I do like you, I always have liked you. More than you think.' Her head was back against the yellowing student-group and her lips parted. He moved away.

'You're a filthy lot,' he said. 'You live for calumny and slander, money and scandal. Your nice little solidarity cliques. And who are you?' he asked with bitter scorn. 'A secretary, a mere glorified clerk, setting yourself up as .. . You can tell your friends the Governors to do exactly what they like. Let them call their dirty gloating tribunal. They can't win. It's the truth that wins. I'll have them all up for slander.' He caught the bright stone image of himself, a man of probity, a scholar, set upon by ignorant yahoos. 'Now you can go. Go on, go.'

'After all I've done for you,' she whined. 'After all the friendship I offered. I wanted to be a friend.'

'You a friend,' he sneered. 'I choose my own friends. Go on, get out. And in future . . .' He stopped, unable now to be certain of any future. Fear shook him suddenly. How could he afford to stand out against the dog-toothed malicious powerful? Even the mere whiff of a suggestion of scandal . . . What did they want? Did they just want him to go, leave the post for their own corrupt candidate, one of the clique, one of the .. .

'Has Gardner anything to do with this?' he asked suddenly.

'Doctor Gardner?' She looked at him, knowing, stupid. 'I couldn't say, I'm sure. I'm not supposed to know anything, I'm only the secretary. Not your secretary,' she added, boldly and with her first real insolence of tone. 'The School's secretary. Long before you were thought of. I've always been with the School. And after you're gone . .

'Yes. You're determined that I shall go, aren't you?'

`No.' She seemed to languish at him, her body drooping.

`I don't want you to go. Oh, why have you been so foolish? I've always wanted to be a friend. And then I see you with that young girl, that young teacher, in your office. Oh, why do you have to do these things?'

`Go on,' he said. `Go.'

always stand by you, defend you.'

`All right. Please go.'

She hesitated, dropped her bag, pulled her edge-to-edge coat more firmly on. He looked away from her, waiting for her to leave, his mind torpid. 'I'm going,' she said. 'You've let me down. You've let us all down. Wait, that's all, just wait.' Then she left.

Four

`THE TIME has been so short'

`So very, very short.' For here they were again on the Channel packet, going back. The little ship reared and bucked, rocking-horsing away from the sharp tastes and headiness of France. Some of the children were green at the rails, looking down like expiring saints at the wash-pot of the Channel which foamed and slavered and hissed flowers of spray at them, far below the groaning hulk, a squelchy monster in a zoo-pit. They wondered whether it had been worth it, the brief week of sight-seeing between two marine sessions of wanting to die, leaning over and wishing that life itself be thrown up with the acrid bile. Rich and Cowie, their school caps over tossed hair, offered comfort to little Dale, saying:

`Think of nice fat greasy pork, kid.'

`Wernp. Let it come up. Give the fishes a treat.'

At the stern, watching the boiling wake, Howarth and Hilda stood hunched in their coats, their faces and hair boxed and back-handed by the wind. Hilda said:

`But I suppose we should have had more sense.'

`He's all right, I tell you. It could have been a great deal worse. A few cuts and bruises, that's all. These things will happen.'

`Oh, but it's not only that. They know, you see. The kids know.'

`You said that it didn't matter whether they knew or not'

`That,' she said, 'was the fault of the Pernod.'

`Yes, the Penrod.'

`We should have been there. They never remember that the traffic goes the other way. It was our fault.'

`Mine,' said Howarth. 'It might as well be mine All of it.'

`We were both mad.'

`Are mad.' He pressed her gloved hand. 'Or let me speak for myself. I like my madness.'

`No, Chris. This can't go on.'

`Oh, I don't know.' Howarth closed his eyes and let the wind beat, in gusts against their lids, memories of the past week. Not the riches of the Ile de la Cite, the great spokes of avenues radiating from the Arc de Triomphe, the green spring smells of the Bois de Boulogne, the statuesque alexandrines of *Phedre,* but the nights with Hilda in the cafés (the children left to their own devices). He remembered the youths on Holy Saturday evening who danced a mime of sodomy, accompanied by an indecent song and a wild-haired middle-aged man side-drumming on the table, big-drumming on the counter; the dark-clothed men discussing the death of Antoine (fallen off his ladder, drunk — a great loss, a superb billiards-player); the open lusts of the late evening. Then Hildal kisses, Hilda's body, his own un-masterable excitement. One evening they had bath been very drunk, he so drunk that France seemed to topple back through time, the language itself flowing back to its origins, so that he could have sworn that he heard two drunken workmen swearing eternal amity to each other in the very words of the Strasbourg Oath *(Pro Deo amur et tyro christian toblo et nostro salvanzent . . .1* And then to bed with Hilda and language older than Latin. Mad, yes, mad.

`It's the end,' said Hilda. 'We had our little holiday, but now it's the end.'

Howarth sighed. The trouble was that he had to have love; the lute and the Priapic emblem, the elements of the

Platonic duality — these had to be reconciled. He had to convince himself that he really had a soul, that the emotions which seemed so significant really did subsist in the world of values. He said:

`Don't say that. Don't say it's the end.'

She wrenched her hand away. 'We've got to be sensible. It can't go on. It will have to end soon, anyway. Better make it end now.

Dale, sprawled on the taffrail, let out the grainy bilious flow to the bilious waves, his stretched retching mouth like the gargoyle of a public drinking-fountain. But Rich and Cowie had passed on to see the wounded bound-up child who had been knocked down in a Paris street. Mimms looked up at them, a bandage round his head, a bandage round his left wrist, unseen bandages round his upper right arm and his right ankle.

`You haven't had much of a time, kid,' said Rich.

`It was all right,' said Mimms.

`It was all their fault,' said Cowie, jerking his gum-chewing head towards the stern of the boat. 'They should have been there, not messing about like they were doing.'

`You could get damages for that,' said Rich. 'Heavy damages. Money.'

`I'd forgotten that the traffic was different over there,' said Mimms. 'It was going slow, though, that car.'

`You'd have got killed if it had been going fast,' said Rich. `Mangled, dead in some French hospital, with nobody to see you die except some nattering old frogs.'

`I was lucky,' said Mimms.

`It was all their fault,' repeated Cowie. `If I was you, I'd raise bloody hell about that. You might get some money out of it.'

`It was all an excuse,' said Rich. 'It *was* just an excuse to give each other the old one-two.' He chewed roundly.

`Taking a lot of kids to France and then pretending it was all for their education. Paid good money out, too. My dad won a bit on the pools, and he was going to put it down for a telly. But he let me go on this instead. Waste of time, it was. A lot of old frogs jabbering away all the time, and everything smelling of them strong onions. Picture galleries and what-not. We could have gone to London for the Festival of Britain and gone on them Domes of Discovery and things. It was a waste of time. And it was all his fault.' He nudged towards the stern.

`It was an accident,' said Mimms. 'It was the traffic going the wrong way.'

`We nearly got done in,' said Cowie. 'Them two kidnappers. And he roared his head off laughing. Drunk as a coot, he was.'

`Anyway,' said Rich, 'we'll be back home soon. No telly, though. My dad could have put down the deposit with that money.' The growing cliffs danced on the horizon. 'Instead of all them picture galleries and R.C. churches.'

Soon the boat nosed into the harbour. Mimms prepared the act of the veteran, home from the distant fighting, wounded, the hero. He imagined the bands playing and the cheering crowds. But there were only the gloomy Customs sheds and the waiting train .. .

After the steam and whistles and clatter of Victoria, the tired dispirited standing in the Tube trains, the wait at St Pancras and the sleepy hungry journey in the homebound dirty third-class carriages, Howarth and Hilda at last were able to dismiss their platoon. Howarth sent them off sadly to their local buses, for they were a sort of earnest of the continued satisfaction of desire.

`Good-bye, Doris. See you at school.'

`Ta ta. Be good.'

`Or rivoyer, Marlene.'

They went off, leaving the grim, grimy local station with its laboratory smell of sulphuretted hydrogen, its closed bar and its bell-jarred sandwiches curling up for the night. They were home again, and they could not understand their feelings. If Paris had disappointed them so much, why did home seem so dull, dirty, pedestrian? Perhaps, thought Howarth, watching them move off, dishevelled and creased with their cases, some of them had started to grow up, had begun to learn that all horizons are recessive.

He and Hilda stood alone in the booking-hall.

`This is it,' he said, 'till the beginning of next term. May we kiss?'

`Oh, don't be silly, Chris. This isn't Montmartre.'

`Shall I see you at all before then? Is there any chance that you mayn't be going off to see' — he gulped — `Sweetypie?'

`He expects me. He's booked a room near the barracks.'

`And what will you do? Mess nights? Dancing? Making love?' He grinned to himself as he felt the familiar symptoms of jealousy. Twitching whiskers out of the sewer. But could a rat, while living in a sewer, be conditioned to a Pavlovian stimulus?

`Perhaps.'

`And I suppose you'll tell him everything. The things we did together, the things I said when I was ..

`Don't be horrible, Chris.' Her face creased in distaste.

I'm sorry. It's just that I'm . .

`You've no right to be jealous. You know that.'

`All right. I'll say no more. How are you getting home?'

`By taxi, if there is one. Can you get me one?'

Howarth summoned the sole Daimler from the dark forecourt of the station. He watched her go off with something like relief. The need to protest love — not for her sake, but for his — could now sleep. Meanwhile a car had driven up

to the ill-lit entrance, the engine running, the electric horn sirening urgently.

`Leary?' said Howarth.

`I heard you were coming back on this train,' said Leary. `Veronica told me, as a matter of fact. Get in.'

`What's the matter, Leary? Is something wrong? I was going to call in at the Crichton . .

Leary spoke quietly, his brogue buzzing and sliding. 'The specialist has been in. He advises immediate hysterectomy. He can't move without your permission. Do you give it?'

`Hysterectomy? Removing the uterus? Why are they doing that?' The car hummed past the Town Hall (garlanded for the Festival of Britain) and the shrouded shops.

`They think it's the only way. Or Godkin thinks so. I'm not so sure. She's of child-bearing age. Godkin is always a great one for wanting to cut things out.'

But what exactly is the matter?'

`Inversion of the uterus. I've known it put right before. I don't think there's any need for anything as drastic as hysterectomy.'

But this man — whatever his name is — he's a specialist, isn't he?'

Leary said sourly: 'Yes. He's a specialist.'

`Why this urgency?' asked Howarth. "'Immediate you said.'

`Hxmorrhage. They've got to stop the haemorrhage. Godkin says this is the only way.'

`And that will definitely stop it?'

`Yes.' Leary, his eyes on the road, said it grudgingly.

`I give my permission, of course. How does Veronica feel about it?'

`You know what women are like. Godkin was very persuasive.'

`That's all right, then.'

The car began to mount the hill to the hospital. 'You're her husband,' said Leary, after a mile's climbing. 'What you say goes.'

They entered the hospital and walked to Veronica's private ward. Howarth moved over to her and kissed her with a show of love, of having missed her. But he felt that it was not altogether a show. His body sated, he could afford love. Perhaps one always had to have two women. Perhaps polygamy was more natural than the laws of the West would allow.

`You had a good time?' said Veronica.

'It wasn't bad,' said Howarth. 'Hilda Connor was there. She came at the last minute. Old Woolton's ham-handed request.'

`Charles has been so kind. He had me moved in here.'

`That costs money,' said Howarth, with a questioning glance at Leary.

`No.' Leary shook his head curtly, frowning. 'Well, my dear,' he said to Veronica, 'tomorrow's the day. Godkin's scheme goes according to plan. I thought it would.'

She looked at Howarth, sizing him up. 'The holiday's done you good. You look rested. You did what you promised?'

'I always do what I promise,' he said.

`Did you get a huge penance?'

`Enormous.'

`You look as if a great load had been lifted off your shoulders.'

'It is rather like that.'

`Tomorrow,' repeated Leary. 'It's a simple operation, and I know you're not going to be scared.'

`It's better this way, isn't it?' said Howarth.

`Yes,' said Veronica. `No more trouble after that.'

'No more trouble.' They smiled at each other.

Five

PETER was back from the North. He sat alone in his bedroom, which was also his father's study and library. Three walls of books stared at him fixedly, books in most of the languages of Western Europe, as well as one that was all ink splashes and curlicues and started on the right-hand side of the last page. The foreign books were safe enough, but once Peter had opened a thick novel in English which had made his head swim with the dirty words that shouted from the text. He had never thought that such words possessed an accepted orthography; he had believed that they existed only as obscene glottal events. He had read on, in spite of himself, and then, aware of sin, had put the book back. But, as the reading session could not be accounted more than one mortal sin, he had taken it down again and read on. The following Saturday the Canon had been severe, and the dark confessional had resounded with his warnings. That had been before the Luther business. There were certain proscribed books, books which no Catholic might read. He must be very, very careful, remembering that a Protestant country laid traps for the faithful even in its municipal libraries. What? One of his father's books? He must leave his father's books severely alone, unless, of course, he could be sure that the title he chose was that of an established classic. Even then .. .

Peter wondered if Canon Moon had had the time or the inclination to build up, for his own delectation, a fine, monstrous picture of his father through these several revelations of the confessional. Now, according to Rich and Cowie

and certain others who had been on the Paris trip, his father had committed (there was no other word for it) adultery. Rich had said that a little girl on the trip had actually *seen* them together, in Mrs Connor's bedroom. Well, that was one sin that Canon Moon would have to find out for himself.

It was very difficult to be a good Catholic. Peter lay on his bed and tried to learn certain answers from the *Catechism of Christian Doctrine*. From below he heard the cracked country voice of Mrs Crofts, the next-door neighbour: 'Are you sure you can manage by yourself now, Mr Howarth? If you'd like me to come in and give you a hand, all you have to do is say the word. And when will she be coming out of hospital? Oh, well, that's a bit of good news, isn't it? Yes, I see you, you naughty pussy.' He heard her scolding tone and smiled as he thought of Sirikit sitting erect, breathing heavily, disdainfully staring through the old woman. `Come in twice a day I did, like you said. But I had to get out in a hurry when I put her saucer down. Went for me like a little spitfire, she did. Go on, you naughty pussy-cat.' Peter sat up, looked out of the window, and saw the departing grin of Mrs Crofts's old gums, her head kerchiefed for work in a twisted montage of English cathedrals. He heard his father's deep furred voice, thanking her for her offer of help.

Peter turned back to the Catechism. Canon Moon was going to test him some day next week, if he could find time, he said. Peter lay back on his unmade bed, feeling the steady evil breathing of the books about him, the eyes of wolves in the forest glinting menacingly on the trapper's fire in the clearing.

`What does the sixth commandment forbid?'

`The sixth commandment forbids all sins of impurity with another's wife or husband.'

The words raised a flush of excitement. His father had,

according to Rich and the others, committed sins of impurity with another's wife. And Mrs Connor with another's husband. It didn't matter for her, though. Adultery. It had come home, like a disease that one had only known in a book. Another abstract sin had become flesh and blood.

Peter felt for his father's sin. If he died now, he would go straight to hell. But he would have gone straight to hell even before this. That seemed hardly right. One missed mass was a mortal sin and meant eternal damnation. But a hundred missed masses meant the same thing, and add to the missed masses, well . . . He began to enumerate his father's sins. It was like counting up one's money in the Post Office Savings, seeing how far one was off the full set of cigarette cards. Missed Easter duties. Drunkenness. Gluttony? Perhaps not that. Anger. Blasphemy. Prayers missed. Adultery. A curious kind of pride in his father, like that pride in Luther's protests, began to stir in him. 'My dad hasn't a car, but he's committed more sins than yours.'

Being a Catholic was always a matter of pushing things back, turning one's eye away, playing hide-and-seek with a sinful thought, though it was the thought itself that always did the seeking. Was it better not to think, not to look, not to read?

`Does the sixth commandment forbid immodest songs, books and pictures?'

`The sixth commandment forbids immodest songs, books and pictures, because they are most dangerous to the soul and lead to mortal sin.'

But you couldn't tell if they were immodest until you'd listened or looked. He heard his father below clattering with pans and splashing in a bowl, and knew that he was preparing lunch. He smiled as he heard his father singing, tunelessly, in a deep furred bass:

`I have raised and poised a fiddle
Which, will you lend it ears,
Will utter music's model:
The music of the spheres.
This musing and this fear's
Work of your maiden years.
Why shut longer your ears?
See, how the live earth flowers.
The land speaks my intent:
Bear me accompaniment.'

That wasn't immodest. His father seemed happy. Because he had committed adultery? Because mother was going to be all right now? He didn't worry about going to hell, although he must know about it. Peter looked again at the phalanges of books. His father knew a lot. He remembered hearing him (himself with an ear to the door) arguing with Canon Moon, the argument about the Manichees, and Canon Moon not knowing much about it. Peter had been struck by the image of the tremendous fight going on between God and the Devil which, his father had said, were not really God and the Devil, but A and B or X and Y or Black and White. You had to choose your side, said the Manichees. Somebody would win, but you didn't know who. Would he back his father or Canon Moon? The trouble was that . . . No, no, don't think about it. Canon Moon was stupid, perhaps, but he must be right. Every day he performed the astounding miracle. He held the keys of heaven and hell. Many keys, Manichees.

His father was supposed to be corrupting him. He had heard through the closed door, it was implied in his presence. His mother spat back at the little jokes about the Church. It was terribly hard. But Peter knew that he loved his father and did not love Canon Moon. He loved his father better

than he loved God and the Church. All right, it was a sin to say that, but it was true. My father, but not our Father. So there it was. What was he going to do about it?

`Peter, lunch is ready.' His father called upstairs, kindly, maternally. One was going to lunch with the devil. Absurd. The rich smell of frying sang through the house, and the rattle of cutlery in the drawer, the clink of water-glasses called, as his father called, to the real warm world.

His father forked out of the frying-pan, with pride, over-crisped bacon, fried bread, two hard slices of liver. He arranged equal portions on two white plates with flower patterns and set them on the table.

`You see,' he smiled, 'I can cook, too. You'll be ready for this.'

Peter took up his knife and fork and began to cut. He chewed a too crisp curling cracking piece of bacon, and then stopped, surveying his father with horror. He rushed from the table to the lavatory, spitting out the mouthful into the bowl, clearing out every morsel. Then he pulled the chain.

`What's the matter?' cried his father. 'Damn it all, you can't afford to be fussy. Food costs money, you know ..

`It's Friday, Dad, it's Friday !'

`Friday?' His father's jaw dropped, his open mouth showing chewed bread. 'Oh, God, so it is.'

Peter stared at his father's schoolboy hang-dog look. The treat that hadn't come off. His father sat awkward, not knowing what to do. Peter rushed up the stairs, pushing back the terrible heart-breaking flood. It was no good, no good at all. It would all have to be put right somehow, but, God, it wasn't fair, wasn't fair.

One

T x& small library tables had been pushed together to form a single long slab of oak-ply which, grid-lined like a tray of cut canteen tart, was nevertheless sufficiently imposing. The Governors sat gravely round, wearing suits which they normally reserved for municipal church parades. Ash-trays had been set (on Alice's orders), but the occasion was too serious for smoking. Outside, in the young May air, cricket-balls were clupped and clopped at the nets.

Lord Vestige blew and grunted at the head of the table. He was able to see, along the gauntlet of gubernatorial profiles, the Headmaster, sitting pale at the other pole of the magnetic bar. Pismire, Higgins, Claydon, Burton, Shaw, the Rev. E. **R.** Bartram, Wild, Frampton, Brown . . . The predatory beaks, the smug snubness, the whisky-wattles, the eye pouches, the odours of timber-yard, shop, coal office, printing works, sanctity.

`This meeting has been called,' began Lord Vestige, 'called because, er . . .' He examined with hypermetropic eyes the paper before him. 'At the request of some of the Governors.' He looked furtively round in a sort of triumph. 'This School,' he said. His old drooping lips moved in a belch. 'This School has maintained, over the years, in my time, in the time of the majority of the Governors present.' He hobbled on to the object of the verb, forgot the verb, tried again. Some of the Governors shifted their creased trouser-legs. 'There have been certain disquieting rumours. There has been some dissatisfaction with the way things are run here.' The falling diphthong of the last word fell in an aristocratic jaw-drop-

ping gargle. He cleared his throat, then crouched as if behind a wicket. 'This is a mixed school, and a mixed school has special problems. There is a mixed staff, and among the pupils are both boys and girls.' He glanced sagely at his pone, Burton, and lowered an eyebrow like a miniature thicket. 'That is why we are now,' he resumed with sudden vigour, 'met. Met because of certain fears, certain doubts as to whether things are being run quite as they should be.' He smiled round encouragingly. 'Run,' he said. 'This is painful,' he added. He bethought him of real pain and began to massage an arthritic leg. 'Painful for everybody. But it is our duty' — the ghosts of parade-ground harangues smoked up — `to examine, without fear or favour or er, the er ... the various aspects which are er ... involved. I now call on,' he consulted the paper on the table before him, picking it up to hold it at arm's length like a drawing, 'Councillor Pismire. Pismire,' he said. 'Looked up that word in the dictionary the other day,' he said, as if he had long doubted Councillor Pismire's claim to it as a name. 'It means an ant. An ant. Excellent, excellent.' In high humour he prepared, avuncularly, to listen.

`Well,' said Councillor Pismire, toying with the pencil Alice (as for all) had arranged to have laid in his place, `there's the question of this visit to Paris which was organised I think, despite all that has been said, that to send children to Paris for part of their education is a good idea.' He raised to meet Woolton's the eyes of a fellow-liberal. 'Provided, of course,' he qualified, 'that they are not allowed to see the more unsavoury side of what is, after all, a city of pleasure.' He looked sourly at that concept. 'And, of course,' he qualified further, 'in this year of grace 1951 it may be wondered why our children are not given first and foremost a chance to see the achievements of this country we all love so well, first and foremost, in the Festival of

Britain in London.' Some hear-heared. 'But,' said Councillor Pismire, 'great care has to be taken in the choice of them who are to be responsible for the trip. I have heard many complaints from the parents of the children concerned.'

`I,' said Woolton, 'have not.' His first words. The Governors tasted them like the drop of wine the waiter made you drink before he would pour it out properly.

`No,' said Pismire, 'perhaps you 'aven't, haven't. But a lot of us here come into contact with parents in the way of business. Anyhow, it looks like this trip wasn't properly run. I think Councillor Wild has something to say about that.'

`Yes,' *said* Councillor Wild, an exophthalmic dwarf in late middle-age. He carried his belly daily round his sports-shop, now protected it with hands loosely joined as foi prayer. 'There was this lad that got run over.'

`I know about that,' said Woolton. 'That was reported to me. It was an accident. Accidents will happen, even in Paris

`But,' said Wild, 'the parents think it was neglect. The kids didn't have anybody to look after them at the time when it happened. What I'm trying to say is that the people chosen to take these kids abroad weren't doing their job. What I'm trying to say is that the right people weren't chosen.'

`I have the utmost trust in my staff,' said Woolton.

`Right,' said Pismire. 'Well, you shouldn't have. A married man and a married woman who've been carrying on together for a long time. They've been seen around by a lot of *us*. In Charlbury, hiding away sly, they were seen.' There were grumbles of assent. 'It was all wrong to let them go. I'm going to speak out and say that they only went over there so they could carry on in peace, so to speak. A nice little bit of a dirty week in Paris, and it doesn't matter a damn about the kids. And it's no good anybody saying they weren't

carrying on, because they were seen. There was one little girl, and I'm mentioning no names, who told her mother and father only the other day that she knew what they did — her mum and dad that is — in bed. Why, they wanted to know, how do you know that? Because she'd seen these two, the child said, on the job, if you'll pardon the language. Well, I don't call that an educational visit.'

Some councillors exhibited honest facial responses to those words, contradicting their shocked grunts of agreement.

'It was arranged,' said Woolton, 'that Howarth and his wife should go. She became ill a couple of days before. Another woman had to be found to look after the girls on the visit to Paris. Mrs Connor agreed to go in her place.'

'But,' fluted the Rev. Bartram, 'is that discreet?' Twisted cables of neck stretched from the tortoise-shell opening of his clerical collar. 'I mean, is it usually allowed, this sending of two married people He made it clear, as to a confirmation class — 'the man without his wife, the woman without her husband?' Some councillors sat to attention, hearing what sounded like echoes of the marriage service. 'Surely, it is the sort of thing that causes scandal, and particularly in a foreign country where, so I gather, people are only too ready to malign British morals. I mean, it is a very indiscreet thing to do.' The Governors looked stern, as if British morals were something being celebrated this Festival of Britain year.

'Our notions of discretion may be different,' said Woolton. 'As I said, I trust my staff. I thought in terms of two colleagues conducting the party. That they were a man and a woman seemed to me relevant only in terms of the party's being a mixed one. That they were, as you are so quick to observe, married, not to each other, seemed to me to be totally irrelevant. As for scandal, I may be naive enough not

to be in the habit of thinking in terms of possible scandal. As seems to be implied, I lack the training and outlook of some people. I am perhaps not, in the sense usually given to the term, a man of the world.'

'Be that as it may.' Burton thrust in his creaking words. 'The fact is we have reason to believe that some sort of an affair is being carried on by these two. And it was carried on in Paris. Before the children's eyes.' He swivelled his grave head.

'You mean?' asked the Rev. Bartram, clerically eager.

'Yes,' said Burton, 'I mean just that. They were damn fools. I beg your pardon. Yes, well, they were. We've all done a bit of backsliding in our time, but the biggest crime, as any old soldier will tell you, is to be found out.'

`Ah,' said Lord Vestige. 'Old soldier, eh?'

`Well,' said Burton, 'not exactly. Flat feet, if you must know. I did my bit, though, same as anybody else. But let's keep to the point. There's this man Rich. He works for the Sanitation Department. He tells me that his son, who was on this trip, Albert Rich the boy's name is, his son was really upset, and that he wasn't the only one. He said that schoolteachers should know better, and I agree with him. What it amounted to was . . .' He sought in his mind's ill-stocked cellar.

'Corruption?' suggested the Rev. Bartram.

'Corruption,' Burton thankfully seized the word. 'That's what it was. Corrupting little children.'

Lord Vestige, in sheer mechanical response to a verbal stimulus, grumbled something about necks and millstones. He raised his head. 'What is this man, eh? What sort of job does the fellow do?'

'He is officially termed,' said Burton, 'a refuse operative.'

'Never heard so much damn nonsense in all my life,' said Lord Vestige. 'What he means is a dustman. Empties dust-

bins, does he? Right, then he's a dustman. A dustman, that's what he is. A rubbish wallah.'

`Evidently,' murmured Woolton. Suspicious heads wimbledoned towards him.

`Well, there it is,' said Lord Vestige. 'There it is, Headmaster,' he repeated genially. There was a silence. Outside, and most unfortunately, a boy could be heard calling to another boy: 'Piss off, Cowie.' Stern looks were fixed on Woolton.

'I don't quite understand,' said Woolton. 'I grant that this trip could have been better managed, but these allegations, these suggestions, are not supported by any real evidence. Children, as you know, are not very reliable reporters. They are quick to imagine things and very slow to reason.'

'I don't think they imagined anything,' said Frampton. Phlegm denasalised his last words to qbadge id eddie thig'. He swallowed and then, remembering where he was, sought his handkerchief.

`You want me to take action, is that it?' asked Woolton. `Ask them to resign or something?'

There was a little shuffling of feet, a rearranging of crossed legs. Someone said: 'Well.' One or two coughed. At last Shaw spoke. Shaw was a Justice of the Peace, head of a local printing firm, sesquipedalian in speech, esteemed as an after-dinner speaker, a fair drinker of gin and tonic water, a thin and leathery man with the slightest cast in his left eye.

`I think for the present we should defer any question of disciplinary action and take this case not on its individual merits or demerits but as, shall I say, a symptom, an indication of something far more deeply interfused which many of us feel has been steadily proliferating for some time now and which bids fair not only to militate against the efficient running of this educational establishment but also to earn it odium and opprobrium in the world outside.' Some of his

fellow-governors admired silently. 'There are one or two points I have noted.' He examined his one or two points. `There was this question of the boy and girl who unfortunately earned some most unpleasant publicity for the School through the court case which gave the local papers such sensational copy.'

`Surely that was thrashed out some weeks ago,' said Woolton. 'And it wasn't quite so serious as the press, and local gossip, made it appear. These things will happen in a mixed school. The children, moreover, cannot be subjected to supervision after school hours.'

`The trouble began at a dance,' said Shaw. 'A dance held on school premises. I have no wish to resuscitate a past and most painful affair, painful for all of us, as we are, after all, in our gubernatorial capacity, trustees of the School's good name. Many of us, remember, are also old pupils, and we wish to be proud of what we may justifiably call our Alma Mater.'

This produced odd grunts of applause and accord.

`Why resuscitate it, then?' said Woolton, wearily.

`It makes part of a pattern,' said Shaw, 'a growing pattern. We may remember the case of the girl who was seduced by one of the local American soldiers. That might have been a daughter of any one of ourselves. The poor creature is now nursing her fatherless child at home. The man responsible, as we believe, for her unfortunate state, was speedily repatriated. But I doubt if he really bears the total responsibility.' Shaw looked at Woolton as if Woolton had acted as the eager pander, even held the victim down and urged the attacker on.

`How can that possibly,' asked Woolton, with some irritation and the beginnings of anger, 'possibly be the concern of the School? The girl was sixteen, she should have known better. As I say, our responsibility for the actions of these

children ends at the school gates, at the ringing of the last bell . .

`I disagree,' said the Rev. Bartram. 'One's moral responsibility for one's flock, to one's flock, is never-ending. It is limited neither by time nor place.'

'I lack the reverend gentleman's divine gift of ubiquity,' snapped Woolton. Will the meeting please come to a point? What purpose lies behind this inventory? A catalogue of old scandals . .

`It's the schooling they get nowadays,' snuffled Frampton. `In my day a good tanning on the . . .' He sneezed violently. `Caught a damn cold. Put the fear of God into them. Give 'em so much homework they hadn't no time for larking. Teachers are too soft with the kids.' He trumpeted the contents of his nasopharynx into a large handkerchief.

`The point,' said Shaw, 'is this. We feel that the tone of the School has been too lax for some time. Some of the more responsible members of the staff of the School have been long aware of it ..

`I know,' said Woolton, wearily. 'Doctor Gardner.'

`As a matter of fact, no,' said Shaw. 'A letter written by the women's staff-room association — apparently formed for this very purpose — was sent to the Chairman of the Board of Governors at the end of last term. This letter expressed the gravest concern at the lax disciplinary tone *at the top.* I think I quote correctly, my Lord Chairman. Lax discipline means lax morals. And, if I may say so, lax morals among the staff mean lax morals among the pupils. Take the two things together and you have the materials for the sort of disaster we have already instanced.'

`What you mean by lax morals among the staff, as a staff, I just don't know,' said Woolton. He had removed his glasses and was rubbing smarting eyes. 'But as for discipline, I made it perfectly clear on the occasion of my appointment

that I did not believe in the brutal discipline of the old regime. I have made it perfectly clear to my staff on several occasions that I did not approve of harshness. I must confess I am surprised that the women should have taken this sort of action. Surprised and disappointed. Disappointed at the lack of trust . .

`You must ask yourself why,' said Shaw. 'There is obviously a very good reason for this lack of trust, as you term it.'

`But,' said Woolton, 'surely we must believe that there is good in every child . .

`And bad,' interposed Pismire.

`. . . And that, given the right environment, given kindness and understanding, given love rather than the law, this good will manifest itself. To induce a moral sense by means of corporal chastisement, by the invocation of sanctions, has always seemed to me wrong.'

`You mentioned love,' began Higgins. Shaw silenced him with a gesture from a stick-like arm. He said:

`We come to the point that, out of deference to the feelings of all present, and, not least, because of the embarrassing nature of the matter itself, we felt bound to defer to the latest possible stage in this meeting. Even now,' he went on smoothly, 'it is not without a feeling that we are violating certain principles of delicacy that we raise the point in the most general teams possible.'

`You mean,' said Woolton, 'that I have been seducing a girl, perhaps several girls, in my office?'

The Governors showed signs of shock. A number of mouths opened. Lord Vestige began to rumble: 'There's nothing like admitting . . .' Shaw cut in quickly.

The Headiriaster; he said, 'has put it in a somewhat down-to-earth manner. He is evidently acquainted with the substance of the disquieting stories that have come to the ears of so many. I say "stories" advisedly. We are not in a position

to make accusations; all we can say is that certain data have come to our notice, data of a highly disturbing kind. **I** take it that there is no need to recapitulate ..

'I think there is every need,' said Woolson. 'I have heard only the vaguest whispers about the nature of my alleged misconduct. I should welcome more information.'

Pismire swiftly cracked in to break Shaw's monopoly of the floor. 'This diary,' he said, 'written by this girl. **I** don't have to mention her name, because if it's true you know it as well as we do.'

`And if it's not true?' said Woolson.

`If?' said Frampton, somewhat eagerly.

`I'm not in a court of law,' said Woolton. 'I don't have to defend myself. **I** don't yet find myself called upon to deny anything.'

`In this diary,' continued Pismire, 'the girl tells of certain things that happened in your office. According to her,' he said bluntly, 'indecency took place.'

`How did you get hold of this diary?' Woolton asked the question with a vague sweeping glance round the table. 'If I may be allowed to ask.'

`The girl was careless,' said Pismire. 'She left it lying about.'

`I see,' said Woolton. 'She left it in a place where somebody would find it who would show it to a School Governor. The School Governor who saw it would then, fired by the public zeal which has always been so admirable a characteristic of our municipal leaders, show it to as many of his fellow-governors as possible.'

`That's right,' said Pismire.

`If I may take up the story from there,' said Shaw. Pismire gave him a sour glance. 'Or, if I may amend a little your supposition, the contents of this diary were already known to a fair circle before the Governors became acquainted with

them. That was the reason for the perturbation we all felt.'

`Where is the diary now?' asked Woolton.

`I think you know,' said Shaw slyly. 'A certain member of your staff stole the diary from the responsible person who was holding it in safe keeping and, presumably, destroyed it. It is suggested that you know all about this, having yourself, it is suggested, detailed this member of your staff to effect this theft.'

`This is most interesting,' said Woolton, with genuine interest. 'Most remarkable. May I ask who I detailed to steal this incriminating document?'

`Don't act ignorant,' said Burton.

`It was Howarth,' said Shaw, 'as you perfectly well know. It is suggested that it is no wonder, no wonder at all, that you have connived at Howarth's behaviour.'

Woolson laughed. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I know that this is **no** occasion for laughter. Shall we continue? Very well. You become disturbed about the contents of a girl's diary. You naturally assume that the contents relate to real events, that every word is true.'

There was silence for a moment. Lord Vestige throated: `Diary usually is that. Write down what happens. As in the battalion war diary. Day by day. No point otherwise.'

Shaw resumed over Lord Vestige's words. 'Not necessarily true, although the entries in question have a certain plausibility. But the girl admits the truth of what she has recorded, she says in effect that what she describes actually happened.'

To whom did she admit this?' asked Woolton. `To one of the Governors?'

`Look here,' said Burton. `I'm not going to say that there's no smoke without fire and what-not, but there's been too much talk. What I say is you can't afford to have all this talk. The School's been getting a bad enough name already.'

The point, as **I see it,** is this,' said Shaw. 'One thing we

don't want is to take this as far as a court of law. We have to think not only of the School but of the girl. She realises what it would mean to her.'

'There's her father and mother,' said Frampton.

`She has a guardian,' said Shaw. 'The guardian knows nothing as yet. It is not advisable that the matter should be given too much publicity.'

'You say that it has already been widely talked about,' said Woolton.

'We've done our best to suppress it,' said Shaw. 'The point is this. It is not within our province to ask the Headmaster for a confirmation or denial of these alleged acts. But — and I understand I am speaking for most of the Governors — we feel that, in the general eye, the School has been gaining a reputation which, considering its long and honourable history, it is not fair that it should be called upon to sustain.'

'If you want it plain and blunt,' said Pismire, 'it didn't have this bad name in the old days. And we've got to think of the children.'

'You mean,' said Woolton, and at last his strength wavered a little, 'that you are dissatisfied. That you think I have not fulfilled my duties satisfactorily. That I am a bad influence. That I corrupt the pupils. That I have no control . .

There was again a brief silence.

'I think,' said the Rev. Bartram, in a funeral-service tone, 'that it would be only charitable to remember that the Headmaster has had much sorrow, that he has been passing through a trying time. That the loss of one's mother is a terrible calamity. That we are all prone to err.'

`The assumption is all too obvious,' said Woolton bitterly. `It's so tempting, so temptingly easy to think evil of a man. You all think the worst and, moreover, *enjoy* thinking it.'

`No, no,' said Lord Vestige genially 'We don't think anything at all.'

`The Governors feel,' said Shaw, looking round at the assembly, 'that in the circumstances it would be better for all parties . .

'You want my resignation,' said Woolton flatly.

Nobody said anything.

'You have, of course, somebody already in mind to take my place,' said Woolton. 'You have a candidate for the post. I know as much.'

'Come now, Woolton,' said Lord Vestige, in a kindly C.O. manner. 'You see how things are. It's a difficult business, you know. A man of your qualifications. Plenty of jobs going. We don't want to take things any further. Got to think of the School's good name.'

Woolton took in the half-embarrassed faces, the vulpine eye-teeth behind the respectable burgess masks. Fire sprang. He knew that he was no longer alone, that a home awaited him once more. He spoke up.

'My Lord Chairman and gentlemen, I have no intention of resigning.'

Shock came again to them, murmurs, turning heads that turned back again to drink him in.

'I shall continue as Headmaster of this School. If I remember correctly the terms of appointment and tenure of the post, I can be dismissed only if evidence of misconduct can be brought against me. I certainly cannot be dismissed **on** any of the shadowy and insubstantial grounds presented this afternoon. You realise that as well as **I.'**

Shaw said: 'We naturally wished to give you an opportunity to circumvent, in your interests as well as those of the School, the serious trouble that, granted the evidence **we** have, is laid in train. **I** think that I speak on behalf of all the Governors when I ask you to reconsider your decision.'

'I will not reconsider it.'

`But, damn it all, man,' said Frampton irritably, 'there's going to be a hell of a row.'

`Well now,' said Lord Vestige, big-voiced and genial, `what's going to happen now, eh? You wouldn't like to think it over, eh, Headmaster? A couple of days?'

`No, thank you. I've made up my mind. As things stand at present, I will not resign my post.'

`The only thing,' said Shaw, 'is to do just what we wanted to avoid. I don't see any alternative. The whole sordid business dragged through the courts. You fully realise what that entails, Mr Woolton?'

`Fully. I shall presumably be charged with some crime or other. Crimes, I suppose. All of them serious. Certain people — and I know which ones — will have to commit perjury on the witness-stand. For the good of the School.'

Most of the Governors were beginning to look disturbed. Woolton felt a curious elation. Truth will prevail. *'Integer vita scelerisque gurus .* The rumble of talk threw up odd spars and salt-eaten sticks. 'Ought to resign . . . Get rid of the.. . Carrying on . . . It's true enough . . . All come out in court . .

`I take it you have no further business with me?' said Woolton. 'The question of the memorial panel can wait, I suppose. If you will excuse me, I have work to do.' Outside the windows the clup and clop of net-practice could be clearly heard. He went out, closing the library door quietly.

Two

HOWARTH, on duty, in his gown, stood with Hilda on the verge of the huge school playing-field. In the distance the May sun burned back heliographs from the windows of the suburb. There was a summer hum of arterial traffic. It was lunch-time, and the near-by dining-hall rang with the din of the second sitting. On the rain-greened acres of turf, disfigured with boundary-marks and the sacred strips of tender wicket, the replete children romped and strolled. Stocking-tops and a tight grey pair of knickers showed as a girl rolled, delightedly screaming, over. Boys aimed balls, tugged and pushed each other. Girls who were close friends walked, talking secrets with interlaced arms.

`A few weeks,' said Hilda, `so Sweetypie thinks. In a way, you know, it's going to be quite a wrench.'

`Leaving me?'

`Oh, Chris, you are egotistical. Well, yes, you, if you like, and the School, and mother, and friends. England, too,' she added.

'I wonder if you'll like it,' said Howarth. 'You'll be very much the officer's lady.' It was all over between them, that was what she'd said. Still, just as well. It couldn't last. Desire diminishes as the pulses of the circles beat more feebly, the stone already settled at the bottom of the pond.

`Ennis says I'll love it. He was there during the war, you know. There's the whole of Spain next door, the climate's wonderful.'

Howarth looked with something like anguish at the known rather rigid body under the smart tailor-made, hearing above the children's voices what he had heard in Paris: her thin bat-squeak of affirmation. Perversely, his body stirred for her now, among the odours of school that the grass, mercifully, tried with a sweeter smell to overcome.

'Another world,' he said. 'Who will you meet there? Who, under that southern moon, will say the things I've said?'

'Oh, Chris, you do get sentimental. I'm going to be the good faithful little wife. The Rock's so small, isn't it? I mean, a staff-officer's wife has to be above suspicion. And I do want Michael to get on.'

'Michael? Oh, you mean Sweetypie.'

'There's no need to make fun . .

'I wasn't,' said Howarth. 'If I know anything about the army, Sweetypie or Michael will get on far better if you're not too much the good little wife. With the right people, that is.'

'You're incorrigible, you know, absolutely incorrigible.'

'Let's go inside,' said Howarth. 'Let's go into the Junior Library. The door has a key.'

'Are you completely out of your mind, Chris?'

'Yes, I am. It's love, you see.' He pondered which meaning of that term he meant. Love is eternal, the body is love's book. He imagined glove-puppets on left hand and right hand: Plato against Heracleitus in a Punch-and-Judy show. Everything flows, changes, decays. But the forms are eternal, the physical atoms copy the unchanging and everlasting ideas. Who was it who said that Plato always geometrises? Forms are abstractions, dead. There was only this warm changing life of desiring, fulfilling. Thank you, darling, that was lovely.

'You'll get over it,' said Hilda. 'You and Veronica will be happy again. You'll be able to live a more normal life.

Unless, of course, the Catholic Church says it's all wrong to make love if you can't have children.'

'It doesn't say that. The funny thing is that Veronica doesn't seem to care as much as she did. About religion, I mean. She used to be so eager to get to Mass. Now she says she's too tired to go. Peter and Leary go together. Veronica and I lie in bed, talking when we're not sleeping.'

'What do you talk about?'

'The future.' Howarth took from his wallet a crumpled business-card. 'I'm hungry for the South,' he said. 'But I'm not sure whether this chap really meant it. I daren't write. It may have been just because he'd had a few drinks and we'd been on the Rhine together. I wasn't sober, either.'

'That was the night when you thought everything was funny?'

'Don't remind me.' They walked along the perimeter of the field. The strengthening sun irradiated the green shaken veins of the sycamores. The grass smelt headily of cricket and sports-days. The next station was Whitsun.

'He might have meant it. You ought to write to him. You could perhaps make a lot of money in that sort of job.'

'I just don't know. And then there's the question of Peter's education.'

'Peter will be all right. You worry too much, Chris, honestly you do. About your soul and about love and about Peter's education.'

'And about money.'

'Oh, yes, I'd almost forgotten the money. You'll get money, Chris. You'll be successful in something, I'm sure of that.'

Howarth looked down at her. It seemed that something like genuine affection or compassion was traced on her lips and wrinkled her eyes. Behind her brown hair the clouds were propelled softly and seriously over blue which suggested the sea, travel.

'I'm not getting any younger,' he said.

'You're not old. Not,' she qualified, 'all that old. Don't be silly.'

She was young enough, perhaps, to believe that at forty a man flagged, his strength sapped. He saw clearly a mess-night of young groomed officers, untested by war, surrounding her chair: Each right hand held a pink gin, a white-coated orderly stooped with his obsequious tray. He felt a pang of jealousy for youth. Another few years and he would have toppled into the new region of middle age. Hair receding to baldness, the fitting of mouth-clogging dentures, the growing paunch and the beginnings of long sight. And the delicious girls laughed among spruce, sleek-haired subalterns. And he himself would *become* his body, past the age when he could offer it as a clean shining instrument, not yet arrived at the blessed period when the body began to dissociate itself from the personality, became silver and parchment with a glassy beauty of their own.

'I must go in,' said Hilda. 'We're seen together too much, Chris. Besides, I have to look for something in the library.'

'Yes, let's go to the Junior Library.'

`Don't be silly.'

'I've got to come in anyway, to patrol the classrooms.'

'Do that later. Let me go in on my own.' She walked off, elegant, tripping in high heels. Howarth thought how a woman was made desirable by — he smiled at the schoolmen's term — her *accidents.* In the act itself one lost her beauty; all was reduced to oneself and the irrelevant impersonal madness in the dark.

Two boys were fighting in a classroom, their hair wiry and their ties under their ears. He grasped them by the scruff of their collars and hurled them out into the air. In another classroom a boy sat adenoidally drinking a comic. He came to as from deep sleep when Howarth ordered him off.

There she was, in the ante-room where the books for the juniors were kept. So. She as much as himself. He had put the idea of the Junior Library into her head. She was standing by the shelves with her eyes wrinkling at a copy of *Little Women.* She looked up, smiling.

'I don't suppose you've ever read this,' she said. 'You'll say my taste is poor. Really, Chris . . . Don't be silly .. . People will see you . .

Howarth had clicked the catch in the door. He seized her swiftly, as if to avoid the pain of the nettle, brought her struggling head round and kissed her protesting lips.

`You're mad. Let me go.'

`It's quite safe,' he said. He held her and took more and more urgent kisses, his eyes coldly and disinterestedly taking in book-titles: *The Last of the Mohicans, Coral Island, Good Wives, The Swiss Family Robinson.* The massacre of the innocents. The library table held an exercise-book record of borrowings. He heard its swish and the tiny clatter of its string-attached pencil as both fell to the floor. Hilda, against the table, tried to assert sanity with a feeble hand pushing his chest. He renewed his kisses while *Tom Brown's Schooldays, Moon fleet, John Halifax Gentleman* looked blandly on. He broke away for an instant and threw his gown to the floor.

Footsteps outside, as of children. Excited voices.

'Mr Howarth ! Are you in there, Mr Howarth?'

'Mr Howarth !' The door-handle turned and re-turned ineffectually.

`The door's locked.'

'Mr Howarth, are you there?'

`There's nobody in there.'

`Look in the other library.'

`Perhaps he's gone to the lay.'

`Mr Howarth 1'

.. A horrible mess . . . they've sent for the doctor.'

He rapidly combed his hair, saying nothing to Hilda's shocked face, straightening his tie and putting on his gown. He heard the departing searching children's voices, talking about an accident, blood, a terrible mess, the doctor. He uncaught the door and rushed out, hearing Hilda say: 'I told you. I knew it was all wrong.'

2

A bit of sport with a soft ball in the patch of playground near the laboratories, detached from the main building. Mimms, bandaged still but game, Dale and Lees loud and whole-hearted as they hurled into the high blue winging air the ball that hovered at the zenith like a falcon and then came spinning down to eager hands grasping for it as for manna. Peter was a shy participant; he had a dim feeling that the boys were trying to be nice to him. On the periphery Rich kicked a stone, hands in pockets, chewing a cud of gum.

Dale, spotted and snotty, with a disc-thrower's aim to the high heavens, sent up the spinning rubber. It hung for the long descent. Hungry eyes watched it, gauged it, made ready. It was good fielding practice.

`To you, 'Owarth. 'Ere it comes.'

`Catch it.'

`Mende de chat.' Lees was very proud of that pun, part of the spoils of the Paris trip. Peter, over-eager to catch, saw the ball elude his cupped hands. It bounced to the ground, tamped itself more and more feebly, then rolled to rest in the yard gutter.

`Missed it.'

"Owarth, you clot.'

Rich said: 'You couldn't catch measles, kid. Here, give us that ball.' He scooped it from the gutter and, with a hurl of his short right arm, shot the ball into higher air than any had so far achieved. Eyes and open mouths watched its trajectory. From a distant hovering speck it emerged down the long vertical air-tunnel, growing to its real size as it hurtled down. Rich, with simian strides, reached its arrival and hugged it like a kitten to his breast.

`You chuck it up, kid.' He tossed the ball to Peter. 'Real high.'

Peter sent it on its heaven-journey without much zest. The ball falconed and faltered above the Chemistry laboratory, then came to rest in a gutter of the roof.

`Silly clot.'

`I couldn't help it,' said Peter.

`We'll have to get a ladder.'

The boys stood around, arms akimbo, eyes up at the roof, as though considering repairs, working out an estimate.

woesn't matter all that much, does it?' said Peter. 'It's only a cheap ball.'

`Cheap?' said Lees, with a boy's indignation. 'I like that.'

`I'll get you another,' said Peter.

`He's rolling in it,' said Mimms, 'because his dad's a teacher. Too high to climb, that is.' He looked up at the roof.

`You're not allowed to climb,' said Dale. 'Roberts got two hundred lines for getting on to the pavilion roof.'

`Who's on duty?'

`His dad.' Lees shrugged head and shoulder towards Peter.

`He's not around.' Rich measured the height with his eye. `It's easy enough to get up there. There's that drainpipe and that window.'

`There's them railings, though, with spikes on.'

`Forget it,' said Lees. He prepared to stroll towards the

playground. 'We can pinch a ball from them girls over there.' A group of first-formers, their hair streaming and stockinged legs flashing, played rounders, running with little screams of delight.

`You get that ball from them, 'Owarth,' said Mimms. 'You lost the other one.'

`You want me to pinch it?' asked Peter.

`It's not pinching,' said Mimms. 'Not real pinching. Not from first-form kids it isn't. You just take it from them.'

`Ah,' said Rich. 'He wouldn't. He's a good boy, see. He goes to church on Saturdays as well as Sundays. He wouldn't pinch, not him.'

Peter blushed at this imputation of piety. 'I'm not all that good.'

`Not good,' said Rich. 'Scared. That's what it is. You R.C.s are scared of going to hell.'

There's no such place,' little Dale assured everybody, now sitting on the grass and inhaling the smell of old summers, chewing little blades and spitting out green. 'My dad says that hell's in this world.' Lees moodily stripped bark off a young elm. Rich stood apart, superior, older, hands in pockets, rotating his jaws in vaccine chewing.

`They think there is,' said Rich. 'Hell-fire and devils and what-not. But I'm not scared. When you're dead you're finished with.' His eyes filled with empty blue sky as he gazed up, with scorn, at a twittering bird in the leaves.

`You don't know what you're talking about,' said Peter. `You know nothing about it at all.'

`Henry the Eighth kicked you lot out,' said Rich, 'because you said your prayers to statues. But later on they let you lot come back again.'

`You don't know much history, do you?'

`I know more than you do, you big-headed clot. You're not in the Fourth yet.'

`I'm not going to argue with you,' said Peter.

`That's because you're scared to argue,' said Rich. 'They burned you lot at the stake and you screamed blue murder because you were being burned.'

`Why did they have to do it with a steak?' asked Lees. 'A steak's what you eat.'

`Rich,' said Peter, 'you're a fool.'

`Say that again,' said Rich. 'I'm not letting any R.C. kid call me a fool.' Peter looked at the little ugly face, ready to snarl. 'Want to fight, is that it?'

'No,' said Peter.

`Scared, see, like I said.'

'I'm not scared of you.'

`If I hit you, I suppose you'd run and tell your dad. And he'd come along with his: "Haw-haw, what's all this?" ' Rich chumbled his words with kissing jaws, aping gentility.

'Oh no,' said Peter, 'I wouldn't do that.'

`All right, then. If you're not scared, how about climbing on that roof and getting that ball back?'

`You realise,' said Peter, with an obscure excitement stirring in him, 'that I might fall and break my neck? If I fell down and died, it would be your fault.'

`Oh no,' said Rich. 'Your dad's fault. Your dad's on duty. Your dad's responsible. We're only kids, *see.* We're not responsible for anything. Your dad's not here to stop you doing it.'

`You're making me do it,' said Peter. 'Is that it?'

`Yes, that's right,' said Rich. 'We're making you do it.'

`Because I'm a Catholic? Because you think Catholics are scared?'

`Yes, you *are* scared. The lot of you.'

`It's not worth it,' said Lees. 'Not for a ball it isn't.'

`It's not a question of just a ball,' said Rich, with a wicked gleam of insight. 'You're scared to get up there.'

`You want to make a martyr of me, is that it?' said Peter.

`A tomater,' said Rich readily. 'A tomater is what you are already. A squashy, scared, soft tomater.'

`Go on, 'Owarth,' Dale pleaded seriously. 'You show him you're not scared. Better be quick, though. There's not much time.'

`Don't let him get away with it,' said Lees. 'I'll give you a leg up.'

In the shadow of the high laboratory building, by the School's perimeter, toothed with its sentinel railings, Peter seized the cool drainpipe, throttling it like a neck, and levered himself up. He pressed his left foot on the window-ledge, and his wrists clambered up, his forearms tight on the pipe, so that his body slithered up slowly. Rust was already on his hands and knees and jacket. He panted, seeing the roof haughtily many feet aloft, disdainful of his reaching it.

`Go on, 'Owarth. You're doing all right.'

`That's right, kid. You're only a couple of miles off.'

He could see, turning his eyes away from the scattering powder of rust, the boys below, already in a different world, the safe world of earth, cats, cricket, tea. He thought, for no reason, of the cat Sirikit, seeing her slack soft shape sunning itself in the window. His feet now rested on the thin metal staples of the pipe. Pulling himself higher, he was able to feel with his left foot for the jutting top of the window. Aslant, he knew he was almost in reach of the pipe-staple above, beyond which was the open mouth which drank from the roof gutter. But now he realised, somehow without panic, that he couldn't go any higher. He rested his body against the cliff face of the building, like a spread-eagled frog. Nor did he quite know how to get down. But it didn't matter.

`Go on, 'Owarth. England's watching yen'

He made another attempt, by sheer will, to clamber up

the drainpipe as if it were a metal rope, embracing it with his whole body. Sweating, he gained several inches, and saw with hope that he was near the summit. His breath sobbed and sweat was in his eyes *as* he made the final pitch. His feet were held by the last staple. Another heave and he was up, his chest on the guttering, a knee over, and he was safe. Cheers came from below. He noticed that a small crowd had now collected. Jeers, claps, cat-calls, shouts of: 'Good lad, 'Owarth.'

He catwalked, one hand against the slope of tiles, found the ball lying primly in a coign of the gutter. He seized it and threw it down. Threw it like a token of his faith. More cheers. He stood, the hero, for an instant. The descent didn't matter. He had witnessed for the old despised beliefs of his fathers, especially of that Peter Howarth who had said: *'Ich kann nicht anders.'* Catwalking back, he began to descend.

He thrust a leg over, feeling the staple with his shoe-point, his hands thrust into the flared mouth of the drain-pipe. The sudden hush from below which accompanied the sound of cracking told him that... In an instant he knew what. His hands still in the pipe mouth, he saw that the pipe was cracking away from the wall, that a staple had torn from its bed. He found that his feet trod nothing, he swayed drunkenly away from the building with the pipe. The upper joint was detaching itself. A hand reached for the guttering too late. He offered up what was coming now for his father, that part of his father in himself.

The children held themselves off from the body on the railings. They saw with horror and fascination what was proper for films and thrillers, a new sort of animal. They held back as if it would bite them. Rich looked for whole seconds, then called: 'Get somebody quick ! He's hurt ! Run like mad, you bloody fools !' Many ran, at last only too ready to, now that violent words had dispelled a sort of enchant-

ment. They ran from the shadows into the homely sun, past the green live playing-field, towards the big wall-eyed school clock. Peter saw, before throwing everything over, the sky with its sailing clouds, the answering white of the suburban washing. A bird twittered on a branch of the elm. A good act of contrition didn't matter now; he was safe.

Three

'STILL can't believe it.' And yet there it was, in cold legalistic English, in impersonal type, one letter of many clattered off by a bored stenographer. The letter had come by yesterday afternoon's post, and now, at the breakfast-table, Woolton read it through again. He had feared, while still in his pyjamas, that it might be fairy gold, disappearing ink, something vividly dreamed at cock-crow. 'I never even suspected. I had always thought, well, parsimonious was the word. But, of course, that explains it. All that money accumulating like, like,' he searched for a simile, 'something living, a life of its own. Aristotle said money doesn't breed, but, well. And she would have her little joke. Even when she was dying. Talking about cats' homes. This, my dear,' he said again, as he had said several times the previous evening, 'makes a huge difference, all the difference in the world.'

His wife tolerantly poured tea and cracked her boiled egg. 'Yes, that solves all our problems.'

He turned with appetite to his toast and butter, spooning the colours in his egg. 'And there we were wondering what to do.'

'You've no idea,' said Frederica Woolton, 'how glad I'll be to get away.'

'They're a bad lot.'

'I think all people are a bad lot.' She placidly sipped from

her huge cup. 'Not just here. Nobody can really be trusted. *I* couldn't be trusted.

`You were ill. But,' said Woolton, 'there must be good in them, there must be. Why doesn't it come out? One does one's best, and nobody can deny I've done my best here, and they try to hurt you, or they let you down.'

`I let you down.'

`Nonsense.' He briefly touched his wife's wrist. 'You've never let me down. And it's so good to see you well again, the girl you used to be. And now you've restored my belief in myself.'

`It's such a relief to know that we don't have to fight any more.'

`Well.' Woolton thought, his eyes fixed on the toast-rack. `Obviously, I just have to resign because of this business. Although I should dearly have loved them to brazen it out, make a case of the other thing. They wouldn't have a leg to stand on. You see, they'd banked everything on my resigning. Well, now they'll have it. A voluntary resignation because of something that *has* happened. The Gov*rnors won't be able to understand that. Poor Howarth, too. I can understand how he feels. He should have been there, he says, he should have stopped it happening. But, as I told him, you can't be everywhere at once.' He took another spoonful from his egg. 'It's a queer thing, responsibility. There's something mystical about it.'

`Oh, please, no. Not at breakfast.'

`What I mean is,' he said, smiling with a wry grimace, `that we're all responsible for so many lives, right back into the past, forward into the future, lives yet unborn, that we'd be caught in a kind of paralysis if we brooded on it. I see now how wrong my philosophy was. Well, no, not entirely wrong, but a man who's given power can't afford to be as I was. You know — liberal, trusting in an innate moral sense,

and so on. If you're going to take power, you've got to be a big thundering Jehovah, even though you hate the role. The people under you have to believe in your capacity for working cheap miracles. They mustn't be surprised if you're genuinely ubiquitous, and when you're away you should leave behind a number of thunderbolts, fixed with time-fuses, ready to crack off at the right moment. It's because I wasn't, and can't be, one of those big painted Indian gods of revenge, that things went as they did.'

`That tea is cold,' said his wife. 'Let me pour you a fresh cup.'

`This is perfectly all right, my dear, perfectly all right. What I suppose I really believe is that people *wcmt* to be good. That's different, of course, from actually *being* good. It's so obvious, but I've never seen it before. You've got to treat them as though they *are* good in your ordinary personal relationships, but if you're over them, if you have power, well . . .' He sipped, then drained, the cooling tea. `Please, another cup. I suppose the answer is that people like me shouldn't have power. Yet Plato thought we should be the kings, the good men who would rather die than abuse power. It's very difficult.'

`And how is the boy getting on?'

`He's going to be all right. They thought he'd die, you know. Then there was Howarth blaming himself because his blood group wasn't the right one. It's Howarth we have to feel sorry for. Poor Howarth.'

`You're going to be late, you know.' She looked up, smiling, at the clock. 'If you will give lectures at breakfast ..

'It might be a good idea to be late,' Woolton smiled back. `Then Gardner could wrestle with the official Senior Master for the privilege of conducting morning assembly. No, listen a moment. One curious thing is that I feel a lot better about things since I've discovered that I'm no headmaster.

People have let me down, been inefficient, been thoroughly malevolent, more than that, but it's all been my fault. I've not been a bad headmaster; I've just been no headmaster at all. I've never tried strong-arm methods and then been humiliated with failure, because once strong-arm methods fail there's nothing else that can be tried. I've never had my thunder shown up as so many twopenny fireworks. I've never tried the Jehovah technique, in fact. I've just been nothing.'

`But yet you're still going to be a headmaster.'

`That will be different, surely. One's own little private school. A small group doesn't need much rule. And you, my dear, will provide what rule is needed.'

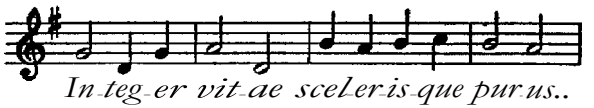
`Alice,' said Frederica Woolton, 'used to tell me about those fat, lovable, thick-necked toughs of the good old days.' She shuddered. 'You've been too good for them.'

'I won't deny that, my dear. I've been too good for them. Good in the sense of innocent. Innocent in the sense of looking first for the good. Headmasters shouldn't be like that, any more than politicians. Power should go to the not-too-intelligent, the suspicious, the sentimental. Of course, the School will go to somebody who just likes power for its own sake. Strangely enough, the School will flourish under his divine governance. He'll never have *any* lesson to learn.' He gravely sipped his hot tea. 'If only one could learn in the void, abstractly, without involving other" people. I believe I was the prime cause of what might very easily have been that boy's death. Poor Howarth will get the whole brunt of it, of course. And he knows, in a deeper sense than anyone suspects, that he is genuinely responsible, though in a different way from myself. One talks about it not being his fault really, mainly to comfort him. But it was, and he knows it. He was neglecting his duty for something else — what, I don't know, but I can guess. Yet I made him what

he was on that day, I made them all what they are. His slackness, his inefficiency — I was responsible ultimately for those. Have I made Gardner, too? Yes, in a sense. But Gardner has enough original sin of his own. Queer, how one comes back to theological terms. That's partly Howarth's fault, I think. Do you know, he almost began a sort of general confession of his sins. I had to stop him. And then there was his son, very nearly a martyr. Very nearly crucified on a piece of bad workmanship, on a philosophy that was out of place. Or, if you like, he was nearly swallowed by the soft sand of our half-baked humanitarianism, a quicksand of sheer formless, meaningless. . . . Good God, look at the time. I'll see you at lunch.' He kissed his wife. 'Then we can discuss what we're going to do. There's so much to discuss now.'

`They'll get a shock,' said his wife.

`I hope so.' Woolton took his hat from the hall cupboard, wheeled out his bicycle from its shed, and was away down the surburban avenue of limes and garages in the May air that threatened rain. To himself he hummed:



It was like a carol for some Roman Christmas which celebrated the triumph of some god of morality. A few thousand pounds could make all the difference in the world to a man. He thought of the deliberately limited scope of his private school. Greek and Latin as a basis, taught by himself. A couple of assistants to cope with the other subjects. The humanities. No big smelling laboratories, no sweating gymnasia. Riding, games on the beach. He thrilled at the prospect of teaching again prosody — Alcaics and Sapphics — evoking the classical sun-drenched porticos, the white walls

which never peeled. There would not be many pupils, that went without saying. He wondered if Howarth would like to teach there. Howarth was resigning from a place whose associations would sicken him.

Woolton entered the School and presided at the morning assembly as usual. He spoke and prayed clearly, noticing, while a girl read the lesson, that a huge damp patch had begun to disfigure the ceiling of the hall. Perhaps that decay was, by a sort of sympathetic magic, also his fault. When Gardner took over, it would disappear miraculously.

Of Alice he saw nothing these days. She would bring in a file or a letter, ask impersonally her bald official questions and then go back to her comptometer. She was away from work more frequently now, sending in little stilted notes about a headache, a cold, a deranged stomach. Gone were the girlish simperings, gone the attempts at a cosy chat and the saccharine enquiries about Frederica's health. She prepared herself for the new regime. 'How much,' thought Wootton, 'will my ghost haunt the corridors of the School?'

In the middle of the morning Wootton was surprised to receive a visit from Lodge. The old teacher shambled in, clad in a grey suit of no shape and a rusty rotting gown that was ragged with the tears of nails on school desks and sieved in places with acid-burns.

`Lodge,' said Woolton. 'Do come in. Sit down.'

'Thank you, Headmaster. I'll stand, if you don't mind.'

'As you please.'

'I've had something on my conscience, Headmaster, and I only remembered about it the other day. And even then I forgot till last night, when I read the letter again. I knew there was something I had to tell you, but it seemed a little absurd coming here to tell you, you see, when I'd forgotten what it was.' He paused, as if expecting Woolton to make

his response in a syllogistic debate. Woolton mumbled encouragingly.

`The letter came from Charlton in Manchester, Chorlton-cum-Hardy. You may know the place. Well, I remembered the girl's name — Linda Chorlton.'

`Linda Hardy. In your form, I believe.'

'As you say, Headmaster. A book had been stolen from her, and I was asked to retrieve it from the thief. It was a diary, I do remember that. And not at all indecent, either, although its indecency, if I remember correctly, was what had chiefly been insisted upon.'

`Not by me.'

`But by *some* member of the School. One of the masters, or one of the pupils. Wait. Rich. That was the boy, Rich. He insisted that it was grossly improper, but it wasn't. You see, it's all coming back, ever since I got this letter from Manchester. The brain is a remarkable instrument. Nothing is really forgotten. All one needs is a catalyst. I apologise, Headmaster, for using a technical term. A catalyst is a substance . .

'Yes, yes, I know.'

'Well, owing to my carelessness, I lost this book. Yes, lost it through lack of vigilance. It was, I think, stolen again while I slept.'

'Burglars?'

'No. While I slept here, or, rather, there' — he pointed vaguely in the direction of the town — 'at the other place, the old place.'

'I see.'

'I'm afraid the whole thing generally just got lost, as it were. It was like a lump in the stomach — only this was in the mind, just like a lump — and one forgets, of course, what causes the lump. But it all came back, on my receiving this letter, everything — the diary, my losing it, and my criminal

negligence. I hope you will forgive this lapse,' he added humbly.

'Well, better late than never, Lodge, as they say.'

'Yes. It came to me finally, you see. But I fear the poor girl must have given up all hope of recovering it. Although, strangely enough, she never asked me, you know, Headmaster. But my memory is very bad these days. Except for my subject.' He suddenly brightened. 'That's the main thing, isn't it? And, you know, Headmaster, I find strange lines of poetry running through my head these days. Things which I seem never to have read. As though another sort of memory were beginning to function. Isn't that strange?' He gulped and said:

'The mortal moon. path her eclipse endured. Where has that come from? I'm sure I've never read it. While I was shaving this morning.' He fingered a cut chin. 'Perhaps this notion of inspiration that they talk about isn't so unscientific after all. And I remember this:

'Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell.
Hark I Now I hear them. Ding dong bell.'

A nursery rhyme? But I never learned nursery rhymes as a child. As a scientist, I should not really admit mysteries, but these things are most mysterious.'

'Lodge,' said Woolton, handing over a small slip of paper, 'can you remember to do this? Right away, if you can.'

'Linda Hardy,' read Lodge aloud, *'to see the Headmaster in his office.'* He looked at Woolton, saying: 'Certainly, Headmaster. And again, I do most humbly . .

'Think no more of it.' Woolton ushered him out with hearty pats on the shoulder.

Half an hour later, the frightened child arrived. Lodge had neglected to consult the master time-table in the staff-

room, showing where Linda Hardy would be that hour. In any case, he had forgotten what form she belonged to. But he remembered what she looked like and had followed the empirical technique of seeking her all over the School. He finally found her in the gymnasium, and it was in sports shorts and gym vest that she reported to the Headmaster. Woolton took in her thin but shapely legs, her firm young body, her scared blue eyes, the face and pale hair from which May light had rinsed all colour.

'Sit down, my dear,' he said. 'There's nothing to be afraid of.' She perched fearfully on the edge of the hard chair, hands on knees, looking up at him. 'You know what people have been saying?' said Woolton. 'You're old enough for me to speak plainly, Linda, aren't you?' She said nothing. 'They've been saying hurtful and unfair things. They've been saying that I behaved badly with a girl, a member of the School. They didn't mention names. At last I've discovered who the girl is supposed to be.' He smiled, seeing the fear. 'We both know that the stories are untrue, don't we, Linda?' He got up, turned his back on her, and moved over to the window-ledge, where his bust of Plato smugly contemplated universals. 'I want to say this,' he said, without turning. 'Your diary's been destroyed. I know that. But certain people are still trying to make you say that what you wrote in your diary — what you wrote about me and about yourself — really happened. That's so, isn't it?' He turned quickly. She nodded, beginning to screw up her face to a child's heart-breaking ugliness, ready for tears. He walked towards her, feeling a tenderness for the young body and the unformed mind that was learning of the world outside the garden, learning too quickly. He felt that they were both involved in the same mysteries, both growing up.

'I never meant it,' she said, sniffling. They had a closer

contact than the crude one she had dreamed up. 'They said I'd be expelled and go to prison.'

'It was all nonsense,' said Woolton. She redoubled her crying and Woolton, distressed and compassionate, put his arm round her shoulder. 'They couldn't do you any harm at all,' he said. 'Nobody has to tell lies if they don't want to. Here, take my handkerchief.' To his surprise, she stood up, still weeping, and threw herself against his chest. He put his arms around her, saying: 'There, there.' This was the time for Alice to walk in. But Alice was at home, nursing a sick headache. 'Let them all walk in,' he thought, 'the whole damned lot of them.' He didn't care any more. 'There, there,' he repeated, patting the girl who now cried herself out. 'There's nothing to worry about any more. Nothing at all.'

2

'I shall naturally be sending in a formal letter of resignation,' said Woolton. The Governors again sat around the improvised board-table. 'But I thought you would derive a greater satisfaction from hearing the words from my own mouth, here, in the presence of the entire conclave. Also I want to make it perfectly clear that this resignation of mine has nothing whatever to do with the allegations or, if you prefer, suspicions which were adumbrated at the last meeting.'

Woolton gazed down both sides of the table, observing smug faces of meaty burgesses or knowing squat skulls covered with folds and tucks of withered skin, eyes that had no interest in the Hellenic vision, satisfied mouths that had been happiest with price quotations, inarticulate calumny, and the fire of spirits in the business-men's bars. At the end,

facing him, Lord Vestige looked vaguely round, as if watching the irregular flight of a minute insect. The others surveyed Woolton, too cunning as yet to display any emotion.

'I am resigning for reasons,' he continued, 'which a man of the world might find it difficult to appreciate, but which are more cogent, as far *as* I am concerned, than any hypocritical fears for the School's good name. Modern politics teaches us that the first task of the governor is not to govern, but to exist. I do not hold that view. I am almost inclined to accept the doctrine of that maligned Italian, Machiavelli, that a governor must become, as it were, a disembodied function, an engine that must not admit emotion or even morality into its working, a force that must think geometrically, statistically, but certainly not humanly. A human being is out of place in a governor's seat.'

Pismire shifted peevishly and impatiently in his governor's seat. 'Are you trying to be insulting?' he complained. 'Are you trying to say that . .

'You are not governors,' said Woolton. 'You're called that, but you're aware that, in respect of yourselves, the term means nothing. By the governor I mean the man who carries the real responsibility, the man who rules, not a collective rubber-stamp or a mass of uninformed interferers. Forgive me for that purely rhetorical description. It's well known that in your commercial and municipal capacities you're efficient, trustworthy, pillars of the borough. But, frankly, what do any of you know or care about education? There's hardly a man here who in all honesty could regard himself as vitally concerned with the transmission of our cultural heritage to the perpetually rising generations. I know you'll all go to see the Dome of Discovery, but none of you really cares a damn about *real* progress. You never appear at local concerts, you never assist at productions of plays above the

intellectual level of *Charley's Aunt,* some of you actively opposed the establishment of a repertory theatre in the town, your Watch Committee banned a film of Jean Cocteau because it was French, your Library Committee proscribed several monuments of European literature because they were insufficiently mealy-mouthed about certain natural functions. . . . Need I go on? Even on the most superficial level, though a lot of you profess a concern about bad manners and slovenly speech, few of you take the trouble to set a good example. This room must be littered with your aspirates. In short, gentlemen, you are mostly Philistine and unutterably complacent. I'd better say, I suppose, that there are one or two honourable exceptions. But bow the majority of you can presume to regard yourselves as equipped for promoting the educational welfare of this borough, God alone knows.'

He paused to savour the angry mutterings. Shaw prepared a battery of indignant polysyllables, but Lord Vestige brought all to order, saying: 'Carry on, Wootton. Tell us more, my boy.' He settled back comfortably. As good as a play. The burgesses uneasily prepared for more.

`I came here,' said Wootton, 'for a comparatively simple purpose — namely, to hand in my resignation. But, as this is presumably the last time at which I shall be expected to meet you, my Lord, or these gentlemen in their gubernatorial capacity (or, may I hope, in any other capacity) I may be forgiven for expressing views which, in the past, I have had to keep to myself. It is well known that, in the modern world, with its exclusively materialistic preoccupations, the big money-getting world of which this town is a microcosm, two types of people are suspect: the scholar, and the man with ideals. That the scholar is, unless he happens to be some technological demiurge, not merely suspect but actively reviled and scorned, remains a painful fact which

contains the seeds of our eventual and inevitable decline as a civilised country. The salaries paid to our teachers are a national scandal. The social discrimination meted out to them by the comfortable tycoon, drinking whisky on an expense account, would have shocked a member of the ancient Athenian community. Because the teacher is poor he is stigmatised as a tramp, a social outcast. Your school dentist, young and untried, earns more at the beginning of his career than a teacher earns at the end. It is, presumably, more important to fill a child's teeth than to fill his brain. You may say that this is no affair of yours, gentlemen, but it is. You, like the rest of the community, just do not care about education. Can you honestly expect me, who am growing old in the service, to pay respectful attention to the weighty fatuous borborygms which you present as opinions? Grow up, gentlemen, grow up, before it's too late.

`Second and last, I come to your other victim, a victim often identified with the first: the man who tries to live the good life, the life of Christian charity, the man who believes that, if God made the human race, He planted in us all some vestige' — (His Lordship looked down shyly) — 'some seed of goodness. Because I tried to run this school on humanitarian lines, I was oppressed with Roman busts of former headmasters, pachydermatous tyrants in effigy and memory, smirking apes of Napoleon, ghosts of vigorous birchers. The good old days of the taws and the hollow thunder have been frequently invoked. Because I looked for the good, because I believed that the human will would, given the opportunity, seek the holy rather than the evil, I found the structure I attempted to build lying about me in abortive ruins. The innocent man is always the prey of the unscrupulous self-seeker; evil needs good to batten on. The weak whom one rules are too idle to control their own appetites or to act without bullying directives. I perceive that my failure — and

I most certainly admit failure — sprang from my unwillingness to recognise the difference between man as a free individual and man as a political cipher. I did not appreciate that the qualities required in a civilised human being were opposed to those most desirable in a ruler. I see now that only the man incapable of completeness in himself can be accepted as a leader of others; only he can sink to the unexpected lowness of the governor's chair. For the art of government involves the stripping from the ruler's personality of those very attributes which it is the ambition of the civilised man to achieve.

'I am leaving, my Lord and gentlemen, because there are other things in life than the exercise of power, and because the gift of power is incompatible with — nay, inimical to — the greater gifts of the full life. I go to teach the humanities to a very few. I go to cultivate my garden. I go to forget, if it is possible to forget, the malevolence, the obscurantism, the gross materialism, the ineffable stupidity have encountered here, not least perhaps in this meeting-room. Finally, I may say that I am no longer a poor man. If I hear another whisper of scandal about my name, another mere breath of calumny, the perpetrator will be faced with such a battery of lawful retaliation as may well make him wish for the earth to open and swallow him. The gap left by my resignation is, I understand, already aching to be filled. I wish you and the School joy of my successor. Under his reign may the School long flourish and the ideal to which so many of us have committed ourselves with quixotic devotion —namely, the building of a good and enlightened world — be realised. Now, if you'll forgive me, I have things to do.'

Woolton walked jauntily out, banging the door in the crack of a quick and final fanfare, leaving the Governors alone.

`Now what the hell was all that about?' sneered Pismire.

'I feel somehow that we were, shall I say, a little uncharitable, somewhat un-Christian,' said the Rev. Bartram, self-reproachfully fluting.

`Good riddance, I reckon,' said Burton.

'Better this way, I suppose,' rumbled Lord Vestige. 'Had to go, all said and done. Still.' He paused, puffing out air from puce-mottled cheeks. 'Something in what he said.'

'Well,' said Shaw. 'The next thing is to get the job advertised, isn't it? A mere formality, of course.' He talked on rather ineptly, in simple words. There was a general feeling that there had been enough polysyllables for one afternoon.

3

On his way from the Library to his office, Woolton, walking with long strides of elation and energy, passed several class-rooms. The weary watch-and-clock-watching afternoon work went on. No drowsy hum of summer bees came, however, from the room where Miss Fry was trying to teach. He watched, unseen, through the glass partition. The frail elegant girl was raising her cultured voice in an attempt to restore order of some kind, just a little quiet, so that she could read them this poem by Wordsworth, a jolly good poem really, interesting, they would like it, she knew they would, if only they would keep quiet and listen to it. Woolton could hear the harsh strained notes which would disfigure her young voice and give it the stigmata of the embittered, unsuccessful teacher. 'Why,' he thought fervently, 'doesn't someone come along and marry her, soon, now?' Woolton saw the faces of sullen girls, arguing with

each other, bright silly grins and an occasional giggle from a couple in the front desks. He saw, to his astonishment, Rich preparing to launch a note shaped into a paper glider from his own desk to that of Cowie at the opposite side of the class-room. The boy's arm aimed, mislaunched, and the dart swam through the air towards the front of the class, landing near Miss Fry. She ignored it, desperately and mechanically teaching, her voice tightening.

There was something like silence when he entered. Only Rich, not seeing him, noticing no atmospheric change, semaphored to Cowie, grimacing urgently, ending with a shouted: 'Cowie, you clot !'

`Come out here, Rich,' said Woolton.

The boy saw, registered, but took his time.

`Come here, boy !'

Rich sauntered out. Woolton, filled with a great strength, energy and confidence flowing, thundered loud:

`When I give an order I expect it to be obeyed at once !'

Rich silently shrugged, a little insolence at his mouth corners. Woolton saw blood, felt the thrilling surge of a murderous impulse, and grabbed Rich by the coat-collar. He held him, almost lifting him to his toes. Rich struggled.

`How dare you!' stormed Woolton. 'How dare you behave in that barbarous way in my school!'

Rich tried to say: 'Wasn't doing anything.'

Woolton threw him to the front of the class, saying: 'I'm going to make an example of you, you insolent young lout.' He gripped Rich once more and cracked his untidy head against the blackboard. He swung him back to do it again. The class was silent, mouths and eyes wide with a delectable thrill of horror. Then Woolton felt sick. Rich's mouth was collapsing into a whine. A flood of self-disgust and compassion flowed through Woolton. He thought: 'It's not their fault, they don't mean it, they just don't know.' It was no

use. He was not the man to do that. Thank God he was leaving.

Without another word he walked out of the silent class-room, back to his office. He had to start getting his books together.

Four

EVERYTHING flows. The casual early English summer moved on, and the naked evening light was shot with the heart-ache of transience. The tennis-players called to each other in suburban courts; the cricketers drank lime-juice on the pavilion veranda, watching the field grow indistinct in the thickening violet air. Suburban gardens whirred and churned with late mowers. The time was coming when good-byes had to be said to England, when fragments of it should be gathered in a scrip to haunt, with a smell of rotting apples and dropped bread-crumbs, the heart of exile.

The loose joint of the drainpipe in the School had been repaired. Hilda dreamed towards Gibraltar and nights in the gardens of Spain. Gardner had left the staff-room for the arcane hub of the School's working, was called by his Christian name no more, appeared stern in his scarlet on the morning platform, was feared and loved by the children.

Peter did not return to school. It seemed hardly worth it, for at the end of the summer term he and his parents, and the cat Sirikit in a travelling-basket, would start their journey to a different life, and the sad summer light of England would be swallowed and lost in a whiter light of Italian sun. They were going to seek the other half of themselves in an exile which was not wholly exile, for England had not been completely a home for them and their kind for nearly four centuries. The cat would ask only a warm room and a box of earth.

Peter had changed. Quieter, more thoughtful, but also more cheerful. He had grown in hospital. He was plumper.

He had the look of one who has discharged a great obligation. Veronica — chiefly, it seemed, for her son's sake — returned to her religious duties, but with little enthusiasm. She seemed more strongly aware now of her marital duties. They looked a happy enough family.

They started to sell their home. They had been promised a furnished house in Italy, and neither Howarth nor his wife had ever had much real hankering, for all their pretending, after permanent possessions. The house itself would soon receive two amiable strangers — a retired childless couple who fancied country life.

`One comes back to it all the time,' said Howarth. 'Sheer nakedness. Look at all these books in which I clothed myself. It hardly seems worth the trouble to pack them. They'll be so much dead weight. What does one want with books?' He and Veronica knelt before a shelf, reading the roll of names. 'Perhaps this,' said Howarth, blowing the dust off a worn Dante. 'Let's try the *sortes Virgilianae* and see what it says about our future.' He opened the book at random and read off the final lines of the *Purgatorio:*

ritornai dalla santissim' onda
rifatto si, come piante novelle
rinnovellate di novella fronda,
Puro e disposto a satire alle stelle.'

'I don't understand Italian,' said Veronica.

'You will soon. I'll teach you. I'll teach both of you. This means that we shall emerge like new trees with new foliage, pure and fit to mount to the stars. Good.' Then he put the book in a sack, along with a hundred or so others, and staggered down the stairs with them. He had borrowed a handcart. A retired scrap-metal dealer had just bought a Queen Anne house in the village. In its sitting-room were built-in

bookshelves. These had to be filled somehow, so he was prepared to buy books from Howarth as he had once bought old iron. Howarth trundled off happily. Veronica said to Peter:

`Are you glad we're going abroad to live?'

`Oh yes.'

`Do you really mean that?'

`Yes, I think so. But it won't be for ever, will it?'

'Oh no,' said Veronica. 'We shall come back again.' They were both hiding a deep regret at having to leave England, a regret they weren't prepared to show to Howarth. It was the horrible gentle green magic of the land that they would have to exchange for a harder light which, like a ringmaster, would whip each snarling lion of a foreign colour to its separate stool. Night would come down like the lid of a child's paint-box, hiding till the clean nursery morning the solid squares of vermilion, air-blue, sand-yellow, orange, citron, scorched green, white that was chalk not milk. And in that sharp heat, as with the action of frost, a world of angles would be made of all except human bodies. England was a magical snare of a land, where things changed sides, merged, interpenetrated, compromised. Real good and real evil were in love with each other, their bodies locked on the green downs. And both Veronica and her son were at last ready for that compromise, prepared to be Englishly lukewarm at last. Their husband and father, with his natural perverseness, had elected to go another way. Still, they would follow him, so long as, some day, they could come back.

Veronica and Peter, urged by Howarth, went to spend their last week or so in England with her mother. It would be a rest for them, necessary before the strain of the move, and the old woman would be pleased to see them both, happy to weep over their departure and contemplate a new

maternal burden to brood over. As he said good-bye to them — the station platform urgent with slammed doors, steam, shouts, the warning whistle — Howarth knew that he was genuinely going to miss them, even for a week or so.

`Look after yourselves,' he said. 'Don't forget to go to Mass.'

`We won't. And you make sure you eat enough.'

`Don't worry.'

And so, each afternoon, he came back to the echoing house, to slapdash meals and a lonely evening. But he had a little money now, having sold furniture and books, and could afford to spend his evening in the Black Lion among the farmworkers in their muddy cerements, bloodying and buggering their meagre dole of language. He played darts with them, feeling for a time part of the world he was rejecting.

`Double top now, Chris.'

By God, he's got it!'

`Bloody good shot. What you going to have, boy?'

He saw, from the public bar, Gardner and his wife come in one evening. They were apparently on their way to dinner in Charlbury, and the wife, charming and well-fleshed, with good teeth and copper-shining hair, was dressed up as Gardner's wife should be. Howarth saw, in an alcohol-shaft of intuition, that all this was right for Gardner — the power, the position, the wife in dresses out of *Vogue,* the Bentley waiting outside, the booked table and the deferential head waiter. He saw that power was right for some men as servility and failure were right for others, and that such men could perhaps justify the baseness and treachery of the means through which they obtained power by their obvious fitness for rule. He knew that, theologically and ethically, this was all nonsense, but he knew also that the School would flourish, that discipline would be maintained, and that masters on

duty would perform their duty efficiently. And that .. . Could a man deliberately damn himself, consciously break every ethical precept, so that he could eventually work good? He had never thought about it before and henceforth it was to worry him. It was a subversion of so much he had believed.

Chipping Wellwater had some very good tennis-courts, and people from the town came frequently to play. Saturday evening brought white-sweatered men, brown hairy knees muscular in shorts, asking loudly what their mixed-doubles partners would have to drink. Hilda was one of these. Her hair was blown and her face lacked make-up. She had been sweating a little and carried the faintest odour of stewed armpits.

`Hallo, Chris.' She accepted her partner's proffered glass of shandy, and stood with Howarth while the others talked in a flat drawl, rising to odd laughing brays, about their strenuous sets.

`Hallo, Hilda. I don't see much of you these days.'

`No. Are you sorry?'

'Sometimes I feel cheated. But you were right in the first place, weren't you? It was impossible from the start.'

`Yes, I suppose so.' There was a pause. 'When are you actually going?'

Two days after the end of term. We've got our tickets. Everything's set.'

`Are you pleased?'

'Oh, yes.' There was another pause. 'I suppose you'll be off to Gibraltar fairly soon?'

`Yes. If I go.'

`If?' He looked at her with surprise. 'But, surely . .

'Oh, it seems there are difficulties about accommodation or something. I've begun to wonder whether he really wants me there.'

'Why do you wonder that?'

`Oh, just one or two things It doesn't matter. Life's too short to worry.'

'Life's become very long for me now.'

'Yes?' She drank some shandy and he some beer. Behind them two local labourers discussed the recent theft of lead from the church roof. 'Shall we,' she said, 'meet again before you go? As we used to?' She smiled up at him, with a sort of craning eagerness. He thought of Kundry and Amfortas.

`Would you like that?'

'It would be nice.'

'We must arrange it, then.'

When her fellow-players shouted that they ought to be going, she said: 'See you at school. Bye-bye, Chris.' They all went out, he heard the car door slam and the starter cough, then the whine of their passage up the scale up the road. No, he thought. Never again the gay suburban freedom, cold copulation with the English voices of summer evening cyclists ringing and circling outside. No more neutral pleasures like that. Hilda would find someone else, but she would never be really unfaithful, because she did not really know what fidelity was. Her nerves spoke, but behind her nerves was nothing.

Sleeping in the hollow-echoing room on a camp-bed, he did not hear the brassy clashing bell-peal of the parish church. Tom Hopkins, Harry Price, Fred Turnbull, Jun., Alf Crow, Alf Castle, Teddy Brian, Will Roberts, and little Amos Wishart were clanging the swivelled baying braying bell-mouths in a treble bob major. It was Leary's loud rap that woke him.

`Good God,' said Leary, 'you're not even dressed.'

`Shan't be a minute.' And, as they drove into town, he said: 'It's funny the way things have worked out, isn't it?'

'How do you mean?'

`Who,' Howarth said, 'could have foreseen, even two months ago, that you and I would be going to Mass together, just the two of us?'

'That's true. I just hadn't thought about it.'

'And to think you used to loathe my guts.'

'I suppose I did. Could you blame me?'

They passed in silence the lying-in villas with their aerial antenna:. 'Will you,' said Howarth, 'miss Veronica?'

`Naturally. It's better that you go. Far better.'

'And what will you do? Carry on in the same way, the same practice? Don't you feel like getting out?'

'Bodies are all the same, wherever you go. Anatomy's the great leveller.'

'Yes. I suppose medicine is really less materialistic than education. There's only one body really, hermaphroditic, stretching from everlasting to everlasting. A Platonic idea made flesh.'

Leary was not listening. He was steering his car into a white-lined parking zone near the church. The faithful walked up the grey steps into the pathetic little building with its one cracked bell. Smoky Gothic, thought Howarth, looking up at it. The organ played a sentimental voluntary, full of semitonal treacle, debased Gerontius.

A visiting American priest said Mass. His nationality only became apparent when he mounted the pulpit steps and announced the amount of last Sunday's collection as eight dollars, fifteen cents. Then he looked puzzled. Then he corrected himself. He gave a sermon on spreading the gospel, the work to be done in the world, not merely in savage lands — though there were now few places, he said, where the radio, cinema and jukebox had not penetrated — but in the stony jungles of civilisation. It was a sincere sermon, ingenuous and not lacking in jejune eloquence, but the absence of a round vowel in 'God' brought distressing overtones of the

cinema, the straw-hatted crooner-priest discoursing simple theology to a freckled child while the strings hum and sway on another band of the sound-track. 'Yeah, I guess so, Father.'

Leary and Howarth drank their pints in the crowded smoke-room of the Dragon till it was time for the journey back to Chipping Wellwater. 'You'd better have lunch with me,' said Leary.

'Oh, no, thanks all the same. I've got some steak. I can manage quite well.'

'Come back with me. We'll have a bottle of claret. After all, you'll be leaving in a week or so. Call it a sort of farewell meal. My cook always prepares too much anyway.'

After the roast lamb, new potatoes, garden peas, after the treacle tart and cream, they sat back with coffee, cigarettes and a choice of liqueurs. Leary said: 'I propose to commit a breach of medical etiquette. Do you know much about this secretary woman at the School?'

'Alice? No, not a great deal.'

'Very queer. She came along with a pain in her chest. When I asked her to take her blouse off, she looked at me with a kind of mixture of, well, excitement and outrage. I had to have my receptionist in. She seemed to be the sort of woman who might scream that I was trying to rape her. I shouldn't really be telling you this. The surgery's like the confessional, but I can trust you, I think. I thought you might know something about this woman. Apparently she was with Briggs before. I just don't know why she transferred to me. She seems definitely unbalanced, the sort who might shout out dirty words under an anaesthetic. Not that her complaint is operable.'

'What seems to be the matter with her?'

'Frustration. Hypochondria. Hysteria. One of these days she may be really dangerous. Sex does queer things to

people, especially when it's leaving them. It rends them like a departing devil. I've seen her type before. The poison-pen spinsters, the dried-up duennas who advance and retreat at the same time, lure a man on and then call for the police.'

`This damnable sex. You ought to get married, Leary.'

Leary gazed at him for a second or two, hesitated, then said: 'Oh, why bring that up? It's all over now.'

`What is?'

'Oh, well, you're leaving. It doesn't matter. I *am* married, you see. I've been married for fourteen years, fifteen next January. She went off with a very eminent gynaecologist. You wouldn't know his name. It was a mixed marriage, of course. The Church is quite right to condemn them.' He spoke rapidly, as if fighting the dock.

'I never knew. I never even guessed.'

`People don't. I'm one of the few eligible middle-aged bachelors in the district, so they think But I don't respond to their blandishments, so I pass for sexless. If only they knew. She wouldn't have children, and she tried to cheat me. But you can't cheat a doctor. So she slept with someone less scrupulous. And so, you see . . . Oh well, it doesn't matter. I've turned the body into a machine, a glorified internal combustion engine, in sheer self-defence. Her body . . . Oh, never mind '

`I'm sorry, Leary. Really sorry.'

`You needn't be. I'm successful, quite content. I'm a good motor mechanic.'

In the evening Howarth joined the Sunday crowds in the pub. Time was getting short now, and he drank in with his beer the final flavours of England, the curious summer-smell of England, the heavy yokel speech. He played darts with George Churn and Perce Gibbons, talked about rheumatism with old Jack Leathers. But, as the bar crowded towards closing-time, he heard the accents of his new life beside him.

It was a middle-aged Italian from the Paduan valley, gap-toothed, moustached and sideboarded, who had come to work as butler in the rambling house of Lady Compton-Etheridge. He knew little English and could not, indeed, contrive an intelligible pronunciation of the name of his employer, carrying this around on a mouldy bit of paper. He turned to Howarth with southern gratitude when Howarth interpreted for him. He had an oiled look and ghosts of old garlic hung about him. He liked England, **he** said, *motto,* he had had no idea of how wealthy the English were before coming to live in an English household, and in London he had travelled on a staircase that carried you up and down. He was very fond of stout, and he would indeed gladly have another. He was enchanted with the wealth of entertainment that television brought. No, he could not sing, but his wife knew many of the best arias - Bellini and the other, inferior, man Verdi. Himself, he preferred foot-ball to opera, and it was his great ambition to see the Arsenal play.

Religion? He spat. Out upon it. It had kept the worker back, the Church had chained his spirit in fetters of iron. He was a free-thinker, and as for hell, hell was this life. Mussolini, the Fascisti? He had taken no notice of them: the wise man does not follow politics but turns first to the sports results, if, that is, he can read. The Signore would surely regret going to live in Italy. The Italians were lazy and much given to superstition. They were not concerned with progress. Of course, every man to his taste, but, for himself, the one country he really desired to visit was America, that new world of bosoms, where all men had two cars each, as well as refrigerators in the bathroom.

But, as the beer warmed, as the minute-hand stole imperceptibly towards the last drinking second, Howarth lost none of his optimism, his trust in his own future based upon the

past. There would be wine and love and the self-renewing cycle. And, above all, God and the various swordsharp manifestations of God. For, despite death and toothache and the young men tossing on their frustrated beds, the silly man with the gun and the short-necked men brooding over maps, the sour morning mouth and the agony of the martyrs, the crumble of towers and town walls, life had to be blessed and praised. Blessed and praised from the ring of marriage and the ring of the horizon, the ring of the universe, down to the worm crawling through the greening earth. But, crawling home in the dark, he foreknew tomorrow's crapula and an empty pocket, the agony of change, of saying good-bye to so much. Still he said, heartburn in his throat like a dirty word, 'Amen', meaning it.

Epilogue

'**OF COURSE,** in this matter, you must follow the dictates of your,own consciences.' Dr Gardner gave his staff a damp batrachian look. 'It means, as Turton has just said, the death of the grammar school. Many of you believe that the grammar school is the apex of the triangle of secondary education. Perhaps I do myself. Anyway, you may feel that your occupation is gone when the hierarchical structure goes. Remember, though, that the hierarchical structure has never officially existed. The three types of secondary school have, doctrinally speaking, equal status. The creation of the new unified secondary school is the logical conclusion of that doctrine. The three merge into one: all children, from the age of eleven on, become entitled, not merely to secondary education of one kind or another, according to aptitude and intelligence, but to a single, unified, undifferentiated type of secondary education. The final obstacle to the realisation of genuinely democratic education goes with the abolition of the selective principle. Naturally, I present the official view. My own personal view may or may not be different. But the unified secondary school represents the new pattern. It represents the future. We all may as well face it.'

There was silence for a moment, silence in which Dunhill, still Senior Master, sucked his pipe succulently. Then Miss Rivers said: 'But I think it's awful. Everything we've worked for. There'll be no room for the brilliant child any more. Everything brought down to the level of the ragtag and bobtail.'

Well,' said Gardner, 'if we accept the philosophy of

democracy, we must accept everything that that philosophy implies. If men are to be regarded as equal under the law, they are sooner or later bound to be regarded as equal in their individual potentialities. Democracy cannot be reconciled with the notion of an *elite.'*

`But you've got to have an *elite,'* said Ennis. 'You've got to have special training for the specially gifted. The world advances through its originals. All the rest of us are mere copies. I think Bentham, or it may be John Stuart Mill, has something about that somewhere,' he added. 'The proposal is that we no longer encourage the emergence of an *elite.* Is that right? We water everything down so that the weakest stomach can take it. The majority regard wine as vinegar, so nobody drinks wine.'

`What's wine got to do with it?' asked Gay. The discussion was a little beyond him, but he had thought it was something to do with schools.

`The public schools,' said Gardner, 'the public schools,' almost singing the phrase like 'the isles of Greece'. 'The public schools will go on. But, as far as our state schools are concerned, the opportunities for the gifted child will be greater than ever. A large staff of specialists, more subjects available, magnificent equipment, a huge library . .

`But everything will be diluted,' said Ennis. 'We sink to the lowest level. We water the wine till there's no wine left.'

Gay looked again, but said nothing.

`That's democracy,' said Gardner.

Well, now,' said Turton. He writhed with epicene grace, light flashing from his rings. 'It seems to me that if you push democracy as far as this, democracy just disappears. The children become ciphers. I mean, they're just names and numbers. Police dossiers, as it were, in a huge mechanical administrative centre. There are so many of them, you see. And when individuality goes,' he said, still writhing,

`democracy goes, for democracy is only a means of safeguarding the rights of the individual.'

`I'm not qualified, nor, I think, are any of us,' said Gardner, `to approach this matter from the philosophical point of view. The fact is that we can't oppose trends of this kind. The pattern is there and, if we're to survive, we've got to submit to it. There are, you must remember, certain advantages to you people in a regime of this sort. Financial advantages. You will be founder members, as it were, in charge of departments. There will be sizeable special responsibility allowances.'

A rustle of new interest, a breath of genteel cupidity, animated the meeting.

`Selling our souls for a few extra quid,' said Stopworth. He thought for a moment. An honest young man, he qualified the statement at once. 'Well, perhaps that *is* a bit melodramatic.'

The change-over will be effected very easily,' said Gardner. `Three buildings, of which only this is at present in use, face a common campus. They will, when the scheme comes into operation, be, not three schools, but three teaching blocks. Presumably an administrative block will be added. A unity will be made out of a trinity.' He grinned. 'We could do with Howarth here now to develop the theological image.'

`Poor old Howarth,' said Yews.

`Howarth is well out of it,' said Ennis. 'He's selling real wine.' Gay looked at him anxiously.

`In time, I suppose,' said Gardner, 'perhaps sooner than any of us think, we shall see a skyscraper school with lifts to all floors, our own broadcasting station, perhaps even our own closed television system, a library with a large full-time staff, a couple of cinemas, a daily newspaper and weekly magazine. This is just the beginning, this fusing of three into one. But I say again that once a country commits itself

to a completely democratic system of education, all this must follow. This is the final and finest flower of the welfare state. It's our job to see that it works.' He didn't give a damn about mixing metaphors.

`Curious,' writhed Turton, 'how the pushing of a thing to its logical limit seems to turn that thing into its opposite. I suppose real democracy is anarchy, and anarchy is Hobbes's state of nature, and then we have to have a large police force to keep the chaos in check, all the apparatus of totalitarianism. It's queer, isn't it?' He squirmed, as at the thought of castor oil and rubber truncheons.

'We should leave well alone,' said Ennis. 'Approximate democracy is the only safe kind. I shudder to think what will happen to this country when the common man is really taken seriously.'

`That sounds like fascism,' said Keyte sternly.

`On the contrary,' said Ennis. 'You get fascism, collectivism, whatever you like to call it, only when this concept of the value of the common man is pushed so far that the common man starts crying out for a leader, and, as the state has been so busy manufacturing common men, only a common man can lead, and he makes an uncommon mess of it. The uncommon man, of course, is never allowed to emerge. Who have been the real defenders of liberty? The few. The odd boy or girl whom we've encouraged and been able to watch emerge out of the mediocrity. Now we're going to get big factories, churning out common men by the thousand. The brilliant uncommon exception will be overlooked in the crush. Though why the hell I should be talking like this,' he added, 'begging your pardon, ladies, I don't know. I'm only a musician.'

`There'll be big opportunities for music,' said Gardner.

`I think I shall get a job in a dance-band,' said Ennis, `discoursing honest tripe.'

`A record library, for instance,' said Gardner. 'Orchestral instruments and tutors, all working under you, to tute them. A harpsichord,' he said, knowing that to be the ultimate temptation.

`A harpsichord?' said Ennis. 'A Dolmetsch harpsichord?'

'A davichord, too, if you like,' said Gardner. 'A pair of virginals.' Gay frowned at that.

`A harpsichord,' breathed Ennis.

`Well,' said Miss Rivers, 'I suppose somebody's got to carry on with the work.' She spoke sanctimoniously. Judging by their faces, that seemed to be the opinion of all the staff. Only Lodge sat indifferent to all that had been said, reading with wonder and child-like joy a school edition of *Gulliver's Travels*.

When the staff-meeting was over Gardner went back to his office. He foresaw the realisation of the scheme he had adumbrated, looked forward to its incarnation with pleasure. Not that he really cared all that much about education. Most people were ineducable, like those stupid little yappers and sniffers of the kennel that was the borough: they would soon have to be brought to heel. When he ruled the new Valhalla of education he would rule the borough as well. Top-dog. God-pot. For, of course, he would, with his qualifications, his pull, his special gifts, become Principal. That had been the real reason for staying put, for waging that unholy war against Woolton. He could easily have obtained a small grammar-school headship elsewhere, but whispers of this new scheme had reached him long ago. That was going to be a job, that was going to be power, the real thing.

Some men were born to rule, and he knew that he was one of them. The greater the problems of government, the greater the interest, the greater the zest to be brought to them. He reviewed dispassionately the quiddities of his own character and was not abashed to find so much missing. He

was, he knew, no scholar; he was, he realised, deficient in moral capacity. But the talent he possessed was rarer than goodness, it was a talent that the world needed far more than pure knowledge. He knew that power could not corrupt him, for there *was* so little in him to corrupt. Only the good, the idealistic, the optimistic were capable of being corrupted by the possession of power. But power itself crumbled away with the corruption of character. The born ruler was incorruptible, for, whatever happened, he knew that power must not be lost.

Gardner was not concerned to ask whether the coming regime was based on a defensible premise. Good and bad, he recognised, were terms to which he could attach no ethical significance. An action was justifiable if it led to the possession of the thing it was desirable to have. Happiness was neither here nor there: what counted in life was the fulfilment of one's own peculiar daemon, the realisation of a pattern which existed outside the caprices of appetite, ambition, desire. The man born to rule was neither the good man nor the bad, but the man capable of existing as a sheer function, a sheer personification of order. Woolton had been destined to find some kind of content in the irresponsible dreams of a Roman or Hellenistic Utopia, for — despite his liberalism — Woolton was fundamentally irresponsible. Howarth was another who would succeed at nothing. He had a brilliant linguistic quirk coupled to a weakness of character which would, till his penurious end, lead him from bed to bar to bed to confession, over and over again. They both had their destined ways; let them fare forward or backward. Upward lay Gardner's way.

He stood by the window of his office, seeing rain fall on the suburb. The School, emptied of its day's freight of pupils, was very quiet. All he could hear was the automatic flushing of the boys' urinal and the ticking of the big clock

in the Hall. Time had brought what it had to bring, and nobody could regret anything; rather there should be rejoicing because things had all worked out for the best. Things always did, he thought, as he put on his overcoat. Passing the bookshelf he felt a twinge of disquiet as he saw in it his copy of *Candide*. Who was that man? Pangloss, that was it. The best of all possible worlds. Nestling by Voltaire's name he saw his own. Herbert Gardner, M.A., Ph.D. His little book on Plutarch and French classical literature. As he walked down the echoing corridor towards the front porch and his parked Bentley, the lesser world outside of the rain and the town, he had to think hard about this question of Plutarch's influence. What did it all mean? It struck him, just for the instant of getting out the ignition key, that some people actually took these things seriously. It all seemed so unreal, so remote. There was that line of Racine, for instance. He couldn't remember the line. Soon, he knew, he would find difficulty even in remembering who Racine was. But it didn't matter. He was stripping down to the essential bone of function: let others have the flesh. He hummed happily to himself as the car hummed down the road. This is the land. We have our inheritance.